

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Five Things Harboring Germs in Hospitals”

Surprisingly, many hospital surfaces are contaminated with germs and should not be touched. It turns out that there’s a body of research on the infectious nature of fomites (infection-harboring materials) in health-care settings. You may never look at a clipboard, stethoscope, faucet, clothing item or tie in the same way again. Canadian researchers discovered that patient privacy curtains found in hospital rooms become increasingly contaminated as days go by, and by day 14, nearly 90% harbored methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA). Five everyday hospital contaminated areas are as follows: 1) **Patient privacy curtains:** Canadian researchers discovered that patient privacy curtains in hospital rooms become increasingly contaminated as days go by, according to results of a 2018 study published in the *American Journal of Infection Control*. Curtains started to demonstrate increased microbial contamination by day 3, and by day 14, 87.5% of curtains harbored MRSA. The researchers suggested cleaning or switching curtains between 10 and 14 days. Curtains are frequently touched, and they are infrequently changed for clean ones. 2) **Stethoscopes:** Over time, physicians grow attached to their stethoscopes. But, like any part of the body, stethoscopes need to be cleaned. Up to 32% of the bells and diaphragms of stethoscopes have been found to harbor MRSA, as well as *Clostridium difficile*, resistant gram-negative bacilli, and viruses. This can be reduced by wiping with alcohol swabs. 3) **Tabletops:** Epidemiologic evidence suggests that tabletops and other hospital surfaces that are frequently touched by patients and staff alike serve as important reservoirs for pathogens. These surfaces have been shown to harbor MRSA, vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE), *Acinetobacter baumannii*, *C. difficile*, respiratory syncytial virus, and norovirus. These bugs are uniquely able to survive desiccation in a viable, transmissible form for days or even months. Decontamination practices in hospitals include the use of bleach solutions, ultraviolet light, or aerosolization of hydrogen peroxide or peroxacetic acid. 4) **Hospital linens:** No matter how white they appear; hospital linens can also be a reservoir for bacteria and viruses. *Infection Control & Hospital Epidemiology* reported that *C. difficile* spores can survive commercial wash with industrial detergent and can potentially contribute to hospital outbreaks. Contaminated bed sheets can spread pathogens to uncontaminated bed sheets, as well as spread germs between patients and hospitals. And 5) **Neckties:** Neckties and other items of clothing quickly become contaminated with bugs such as MRSA and *C. difficile*. Worries about clothing contamination have fueled a new policy in the UK National Health Service hospitals banning neckties and jackets. Health-care workers engaged in direct patient care are required to wear re-processable garments.

In the America that I love, we will keep these caveats in mind if we are a hospital patient or a visitor to a patient.

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