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Summary Report

Hygiene, Disinfection and Patient Experience in Hospitals Project

This project investigated cleanliness in Kent and Medway acute hospitals. The project was done by participants from the Kent and Medway Local Involvement Networks (LINKs) between September 2009 and March 2010. The LINK is made up of members of the public who volunteer to take part in such initiatives because they care about improving services for the whole community. All eight hospitals from four NHS trusts were visited by authorised visitors who recorded the use of the hand alcohol dispensers, took swabs from wards, obtained samples of disinfectant solution containing chlorine, measured the available chlorine concentration, and made notes of observations. In total 1353 observations were made of use of alcohol dispensers and 145 swab samples taken.

Hospital cleanliness has received considerable coverage in the press in recent months, both nationally and locally, and visible efforts to improve cleanliness standards and reduce infection rates in hospitals through the introduction of rigorous hand hygiene programmes have been apparent. Some success has been achieved and incidence of both MRSA (methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus*) and *C. diff* (*Clostridium difficile*) in Kent and Medway has declined over the last two years. Against this background, the Kent and Medway LINKs' objective was to obtain reassurance that measures being taken could be said to be effective in continuing to improve cleanliness.

In general, in all of the hospitals surveyed there was clear signage and easy access to hand alcohol dispensers, although there was wide variation in the way individual hospitals implemented their hand hygiene policies. During the period of the study usage levels were observed to vary enormously both among professionals and visitors as well as between hospitals. Individual hospitals have different policies on the use of hand hygiene and this gives a confusing message to the public. Levels of compliance varied from 80% down to less than 20%. This is both disappointing and concerning to the LINKs. Complete compliance at every dispenser cannot be expected but which ones are critically important to use should be made absolutely clear.

Swab results showed that, as expected, there are levels of bacteria (generally harmless ones) in many places within the hospitals. While it is recognised that it is impossible to create environments that are totally bacteria-free, contamination at key places, including nurses'

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stations, bathrooms and toilets, and patients' bedsides, do indicate a less than perfect cleaning system which could put patient's health at risk. It is still a cause for concern to the LINK that hospitals disinfect commodes but not toilets.

Respondents to the Kent and Medway LINKs' survey in March 2009 into healthcare standards in the County indicated that hygiene and cleanliness and the potential risk of contracting infections in hospitals was high on their list of concerns. Considerable improvements have been made in all the hospitals but there is clearly room for further improvement. However, through this study, we have identified that the inconsistent implementation of the hand hygiene policy across the County's hospitals could be a contributor. Only half of the hospitals give emphasis to hand hygiene at their entrances, and the inconsistent use of the alcohol dispensers by the professional staff sends mixed messages to visitors about the importance of cleaning hands at regular intervals. If, as some of the hospitals insisted, the most important place to use the hand cleansers is at the point of contact with patients, then this should be made much clearer across all the hospitals. Our full report¹ gives results by hospital and identifies a number of specific recommendations for the implementation of hand hygiene programmes and improving cleanliness for consideration by the NHS Trusts involved. The eight hospitals visited were:

- Darent Valley Hospital in Dartford (Dartford and Gravesham NHS Trust)
- Maidstone Hospital (Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust)
- Kent and Sussex Hospital in Tunbridge Wells (Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust)
- Pembury Hospital in Tunbridge Wells (Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust)
- Medway Maritime Hospital in Gillingham (Medway NHS Foundation Trust)
- William Harvey Hospital in Ashford (East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust)
- Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother Hospital in Margate (East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust)
- Kent and Canterbury Hospital in Canterbury (East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust).

While infection rates for MRSA (blood stream infections only as figures for wound infections are not available) and C. diff have decreased recently, our study failed to give us full reassurance that cleanliness, and in particular hand hygiene, programmes in our hospitals are being implemented as rigorously as they should be. Both professionals and visitors need to be more actively encouraged or even compelled to observe the best practice recommendations that will deliver further improvements in cleanliness and hence patient safety in the hospitals.

Kent and Medway LINK April 2010

¹ Kent & Medway LINKs Report into Hygiene, Disinfection and Patient Experience in Hospitals, April 2010 available to download from www.thekentlink.co.uk.