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Fight Superbugs: At Home and At Work

By Stephenie Overman

Even experienced healthcare workers must be reminded to take basic steps to prevent the spread of dangerous superbugs.

Oct. 1 marks the third annual [World MRSA Day](#) and Oct. 16-22 is [International Infection Prevention Week](#). These efforts focus on educating the general public about how to avoid transmitting methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), and other types of bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics.

But Irena L. Kenneley, PhD, APRN-BC, CIC, a member of the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology's (APIC) communications committee, finds that healthcare workers need to hear that message as well.



"I'm not sure healthcare workers do completely appreciate the importance of simply washing their hands. We still have to talk about that. It sounds like the ABCs, but that's what it is all about," she says. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) estimates that during the last decade nearly 100,000 persons died from invasive MRSA infections.

Basic hand hygiene is important because potentially dangerous pathogens lurk throughout the healthcare environment, Kenneley says, pointing out that studies find that these pathogens end up "on shoes, stethoscopes, uniforms, floors."

"Most people put on their uniform at home, go to the hospital and then maybe stop at Wal-Mart. I've always had a problem with that," she says. At Case Western Reserve University, where Kenneley is an assistant professor in the nursing school, she says, "We have a lot of international students -- Japanese and Dutch -- who are appalled with [U.S. healthcare professionals] who go to work in their uniform and go home [in the same uniform]."

In some countries, she says, hospital workers have lockers for their street clothes and their work clothes go directly to the hospital laundry after they've been worn.

Kenneley's own study, "Infection Prevention and Control in Home Healthcare: The Nurse's Bag," was published in the [American Journal of Infection Control](#). She reported an 80 percent bacterial contamination rate of the bags and of the patient care equipment found inside.

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These home healthcare workers typically "go from [patient] homes to the office to their own home. There are potential reservoirs of these organisms that used to be only in healthcare settings," she said.

What should a healthcare worker do with a possibly contaminated bag? "If I had a nurse's bag and a kid and maybe a dog in the backseat, I'd keep [the bag] in the trunk. I'd keep it on some sort of barrier, plastic or even a newspaper, so the trunk does not get contaminated. And then [I'd] do one last hand washing, so you're not taking anything home."

[Stephenie Overman](#) writes about workplace and health issues. She is author of "Next-Generation Wellness at Work" (Praeger).

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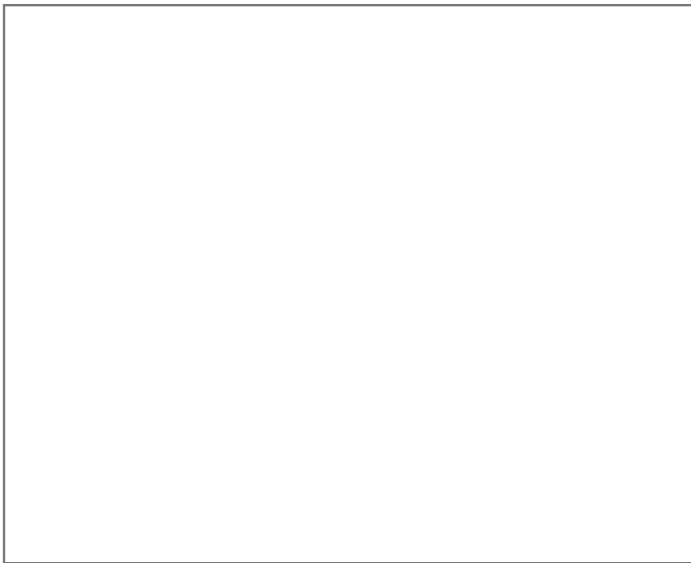
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