



Essential environmental health standards in health care

Edited by John Adams, Jamie Bartram, Yves Chartier

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Foreword

Health-care associated infections contribute to morbidity and mortality, and to a loss of health-sector and household resources worldwide. Five to thirty per cent of patients develop one or more infections during a stay in hospital — a significant proportion of which could be avoided. In crises or precarious situations, the number of infections worsens. In some circumstances, people may choose not to seek care because the nearest facilities are not functioning or because treatment is uncertain due to shortages of water, electricity or supplies.

Unsafe health-care settings contribute to a significant proportion of some diseases. Legionellosis is a well-established risk associated with health-care facilities, with an average proportion of health-care associated infections close to 10%. Sharps waste, although produced in small quantities, is highly infectious. Contaminated needles and syringes represent a particular threat because they are sometimes scavenged from waste areas and dump sites, and reused. If poorly managed, they expose health-care workers, waste handlers and the community to infections.

The problem of diseases from unsafe health-care settings is growing worse. Worldwide, there is increasing provision of health care, which is also becoming more complex. Furthermore, an increasing proportion of the population is immunocompromised (and therefore more susceptible to health-care related infection). Without effective action, the situation is likely to deteriorate.

Health-care settings include hospitals, health centres, clinics, dental surgeries and general practitioner facilities. They provide an opportunity to educate visitors and the general population about minimizing disease transmission by providing targeted messages and a “model” safe environment. Messages can also contribute to a safe home environment, which is especially relevant to the trend towards increased home-based care in both developing and developed countries.

The development and implementation of national policies, guidelines on safe practices, training and promotion of effective messages in a context of healthy medical facilities will decrease the number of infections associated with health-care settings.

The international policy environment increasingly reflects the problem of health-care associated infections. The eight United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals¹ include goals on maternal health (there are an estimated 529 000 maternal deaths per year), as well as other goals relating to major diseases and infant mortality.

At the same time, the UN Millennium Project² and the UN Secretary-General have highlighted the importance of rapidly addressing “quick wins”; that is, identifying specific ways of providing health services to health-care facilities.

Guidelines on environmental health in health care are universally available, but additional guidance for precarious situations is needed.

¹ <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

² <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/>

This document deals specifically with essential environmental health standards required for health-care settings in medium- and low-resource countries to:

- assess prevailing situations and plan the improvements that are required
- develop and reach essential safety standards as a first goal
- support the development and application of national policies.

These guidelines have been written for use by health managers and planners, architects, urban planners, water and sanitation staff, clinical and nursing staff, carers and other health-care providers, and health promoters.

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