Preventing Infection in the Emergency Department

Problem

The emergency department (ED) is neither a sterile environment nor does it need to be. However, with more cases of resistant infections being reported, cross-contamination is a danger to everyone in the ED including patients, staff and visitors. Good nursing care supported by the use of appropriate barriers, gloving and hand washing can reduce the spread of infection.

Consequence

Failure to practice infection control in the emergency department may result in spreading infection to many other patients, families and hospital staff.

Solution

Here are some considerations related to infection control in the emergency department.

- A large number of people pass through a typical emergency department every day; therefore, the containment of germs becomes essential for preventing the spread of disease.

- There are several strategies that can assist the ED to become a safer environment from an infection control perspective.

- As important as infection control is, frequently the worst offenders are the hospital employees themselves.

- Despite all the programs emphasizing the important of washing hands in healthcare, providers are having difficulty in achieving appropriate high levels of compliance among their staff; hence, patients who come into the ED risk cross-contamination from other patients already treated.

- While there is value in the use of clean latex gloves for the prevention of the spread of infection, gloves alone are not enough and may be porous; therefore washing hands after degloving is also of prime importance.
• Equipment in the ED can be a source of contamination:
  
  ▪ Fomites can often spread disease
  ▪ Microbes can be transmitted by stethoscopes and other patient care equipment such as otoscopes, blood pressure cuffs, stretchers, counter tops and mattresses.

• Decontaminating these surfaces on a regular basis can assist in preventing the spread of infectious diseases to patients.

• Infection can be spread during wound repairs or invasive procedures like a central venous catheter; it is critical that the wound be decontaminated and appropriate care is delivered through antisepsis before, during and after the procedure.

• Applying appropriate dressings and maintaining their sterility are important, even in a busy emergency department.

• While the ED will never be on par with the operating suite in terms of its sterility, there are fundamental practices, including good cleaning techniques, that can prevent the spread of infection to patients, and the transmission of microbes to staff and families.

• The use of appropriate barriers, gloving and hand washing will make a difference in infection control in the emergency department.

References

Avoiding Common Nursing Errors, Lisa Marcucci, MD, Editor, Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, 2010