hands. Indeed, the single published study from the USA that examined hand hygiene as a single intervention (funded by the maker of the alcohol-based hand gel product) showed no effect on HAI. One is tempted to infer that the absence of any data-based articles celebrating the wonders of hand hygiene in the publish-or-perish climate of the USA can be viewed as further evidence of non-efficacy. The few modern studies that do show efficacy of hand washing come from resource-strapped institutions; for example, in a report from a 1260-bed hospital in Vietnam, occupancy was 144% and sinks were few—a hints of 19th century Vienna.

To admit that the benefit in modern hospitals is minimal is not to say we should stop cleaning; hand hygiene obviously must continue. However, what should be stopped is our smug certainty that we are on the right track. Our focus on building better hand hygiene programmes has misled us into believing we are doing something about a problem that remains intractable. But we haven’t done anything (except clean our hands really well).

The time has come for the infection control community to move on; please, no more cheerleading louder and harder to get thousands of people to improve their hygiene. We have to accept that our age-old dream of solving a complex problem cheaply and simply has failed. Instead, we must reacquaint ourselves with that lonely feeling familiar to clinicians when they realise a case is much more difficult than it appeared at first glance. In other words, we should embrace the intellectual audacity of our beloved Semmelweis but let go of his how-to manual. As he might tell us (loudly): an ineffective remedy is much worse than no remedy at all.

Kent A Sepkowitz
Infectious Diseases Service, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York, NY, USA
sepkowik@mskcc.org
I declare that I have no conflicts of interest.


Adherence to antiretroviral therapy: supervision or support?

We are entering a new phase in the strategic use of antiretroviral drugs. In addition to dramatically reducing HIV/AIDS-related morbidity and mortality, these drugs have recently shown an important effect in reducing HIV incidence and transmission.

The broad benefits of antiretroviral therapy are adherence dependent. Yet, despite decades of research and millions of dollars in research grants (a PubMed search yields over 40 randomised trials assessing antiretroviral adherence interventions and the US National Institute of Mental Health have invested more than US$140 million on adherence research; M Stirrat, National Institutes of Mental Health, personal communication), there is still no consensus about what works. The challenge of maintaining adherence over the long term, including among a growing number of people who have never experienced symptoms, calls for rationalisation of adherence research with a renewed focus on simple, cost-effective interventions that are proven to work at scale.

A recent randomised trial from Kenya assessed both reminders and supportive counselling on patient adherence and found that digital reminders offered no benefit, but supportive counselling did. Another recent trial, also from Kenya, found that a simple weekly mobile phone text asking “how are you?” (in the local language) provided statistically superior viral suppression outcomes than routine care. During focus groups done parallel to the randomised trial, patients reported that the weekly texts made them feel that someone cared. Another trial found that short weekly one-way text messaging to patients via mobile phones improved medication
adherence compared with no text messages but daily text reminders did not.\textsuperscript{4} The surprising finding from all these trials is that, although the trials were designed to assess a technological intervention, the supportive element of the interventions, not the technology, improved adherence.

Patient support can be given in many ways. The most intrusive reminder system tested so far is directly observed therapy—a method borrowed from tuberculosis treatment. Yet, as with tuberculosis treatment, all the randomised trials so far have failed to show any benefit.\textsuperscript{5} Resource-intensive interventions such as direct observation have been justified on the basis that adherence rates of over 95% are necessary to prevent drug resistance.\textsuperscript{6} There is evidence that, with new antiretroviral regimens, adequate viral suppression can be achieved with much lower rates of adherence and seems to improve with the duration of time a patient is on therapy.\textsuperscript{7}

There is often so much emphasis on adherence monitoring and provider-controlled interventions that we miss the key reasons patients do or do not adhere well. In Africa, part of the explanation for the high reported rates of adherence thus far is the provision of adherence support in a manner that addresses patient needs, often through an adherence counsellor. Patients with poor adherence or retention probably face major challenges in their lives that supersede adherence to drugs, such as fear of violence, transportation difficulties, mental health concerns, providing food and income for themselves and their families, and being responsible for care of children or elderly. In the face of such challenges, reminders probably play only a small part in a patient’s overall health, whereas a broader supportive role might help patients to overcome these challenges. Future clinical and intervention research should give preference to interventions that promote a supportive environment of antiretroviral therapy care because this is probably the best way to improve patient satisfaction, adherence, and retention in care over the long term.

*Edward J Mills, Richard Lester, Nathan Ford
Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada (EJM); Department of Medicine, Division of Infectious Diseases, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada (RL); Médecins Sans Frontières, Geneva, Switzerland (NF); and Centre for Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Research, University of Cape Town, South Africa (NF)
edward.mills@uottawa.ca

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.