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Compliance with hand hygiene in emergency medical services: an international observational study

Heidi Storm Vikke,1,2 Svend Vittinghus,2 Matthias Giebner,3 Hans Jørn Kolmos,1,4 Karen Smith,3,6,7 Maaret Castrén,8 Veronica Lindström9,10

ABSTRACT

Introduction Healthcare-associated infection caused by insufficient hygiene is associated with mortality, economic burden, and suffering for the patient. Emergency medical service (EMS) providers encounter many patients in different surroundings and are thus at risk of posing a source of microbial transmission. Hand hygiene (HH), a proven infection control intervention, has rarely been studied in the EMS.

Methods A multicentre prospective observational study was conducted from December 2016 to May 2017 in ambulance services from Finland, Sweden, Australia and Denmark. Two observers recorded the following parameters: HH compliance according to WHO guidelines (before patient contact, before clean/aseptic procedures, after risk of body fluids, after patient contact and after contact with patient surroundings). Glove use and basic parameters such as nails, hair and use of jewellery were also recorded.

Results Sixty hours of observation occurred in each country, for a total of 87 patient encounters. In total, there were 1344 indications for HH. Use of hand rub or hand wash was observed: before patient contact, 3%; before clean/aseptic procedures, 2%; after the risk of body fluids, 8%; after patient contact, 29%; and after contact with patient-related surroundings, 38%. Gloves were worn in 54% of all HH indications. Adherence to short or up done hair, short, clean nails without polish and no jewellery was 99%, 84% and 62%, respectively. HH compliance was associated with wearing gloves (OR 45; 95% CI 10.8 to 187.8; p=0.000) and provider level (OR 1.7; 95% CI 1.1 to 2.4; p=0.007), but not associated with gender (OR 1.3; 95% CI 0.9 to 1.9; p=0.107).

Conclusion HH compliance among EMS providers was remarkably low, with higher compliance after patient contacts compared with before patient contacts, and an over-reliance on gloves. We recommend further research on contextual challenges and hygiene perceptions among EMS providers to clarify future improvement strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Despite consistent efforts, the prevalence of healthcare-associated infection remains 5%–10% among patients in developed countries. These infections are associated with increased mortality, economic burden, and suffering for the patients and their families,1 thus emphasising a need to focus on prevention in everyday practice. Risk of infection is related to three key factors, the infectious agent, the host and the environment, and often the transmission of microbes takes place through direct or indirect contact via the hands of the healthcare provider.2 Contamination occurs during care and treatment when touching either patients or surfaces contaminated with viable pathogens from humans. The longer the duration of care and treatment, the higher the degree of contamination.3 Hand hygiene (HH) is the most effective action to prevent the spread of microbes, and adherence to hygiene routines improves the quality of care and patient outcome.4 Most acute hospitalisations begin in the emergency medical services (EMS), and the providers encounter a wide range of patients in varying surrounding during single shifts, often with little or no knowledge about infection status and transmission risk. Despite these facts, hygiene in the EMS receives little attention, and most studies have focused on bioterrorism and disaster preparedness, rather than basic infection control.5 Prehospital infection control and prevention studies have focused on microbial contamination in the ambulances and on the medical equipment along with cleaning measures. However, to our knowledge, only three studies have observed HH compliance among EMS providers,4–6 and they do not assess HH compliance using multiple before and after patient parameters, nor are their results based on data from multiple countries.

The aim of our study was to provide an assessment of HH compliance, glove behaviour and adherence to basic hygiene parameters regarding
hair, nails and the use of jewellery among EMS providers across multiple countries and professions. We also wanted to investigate potential risk factors related to lack of HH compliance.

**METHODS**

**Design and setting**

We conducted a prospective observational study including EMS providers from Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Australia from December 2016 to May 2017. All included countries have written hygiene guidelines, but the degree of implementation is unknown. Two observers each did 30 hours of non-participating observation (6 hours a day, during the daytime, on weekdays, in one pre-determined week) in each of the four countries. The participants were either defined as basic-care providers or advanced-care providers and employed by either a public or a private EMS organisation. The annual number of patient cases across participating cities ranged from approximately 60 000 to 400 000.

**Inclusion/exclusion**

Enrolment was conducted from a convenience sample of EMS providers that were on duty on the preplanned data collection days. Only front-line personnel from ground vehicles was included. The participants were informed about hygiene being the overall subject of observation, but not that HH was the exact focus.

**Data collection**

The observers looked at three areas: hand hygiene, glove behaviour and basic hygiene parameters. Observations were conducted on five HH indications, according to the WHO ‘Your five moments for hand hygiene’ validated scheme. Observers were instructed that if two indications occurred continuously (eg, when going from an after contact to a before clean or aseptic procedure), this was considered as only one indication for HH.

Hand rub and hand wash procedures were defined using the WHO definitions: ‘hand rub’ is applying an antiseptic hand rub (no visible soil, and white tips < 3 mm long), no use of nail polish (bare nails), having short or up done hair (no longer than to the chin/neck), and no use of rings and watches (see online supplementary appendix 1 and 2 for Australian and Finnish guidelines, respectively). Finally, gender and provider level were recorded.

**Statistics**

Data were initially recorded on paper and then entered directly into STATA 14 for analysis. To prevent entry errors, each variable was evaluated in relation to predefined expected values by running the STATA codebook command. The primary outcome was HH compliance. Secondary outcomes were differences between countries, and associations between HH, gender and provider level, and between HH and glove use. Descriptive analyses of all variables were conducted overall and by country, and the results presented by frequencies and percentages. Country comparison and assessment of the association between HH compliance, glove behaviour, gender and provider level were conducted using $\chi^2$ tests if the expected frequency were above 5. If the expected frequency were below 5, Fisher’s exact test was used.

Additionally, we performed univariate and multivariate analyses to assess whether provider level, gender and use of gloves could be regarded as potential risk factors related to lack of HH compliance using logistic regression. We corrected for interaction in the multivariate model if any association was detected. In all analyses, Alpha was 0.05.

**RESULTS**

**General characteristics**

During 240 hours, 77 EMS providers were observed, 87 patient cases completed and 1344 HH indications recorded (71 individual providers, as two from Finland and four from Sweden were observed twice because of their work schedule). Table 1 shows that provider level, gender and observed indications varied significantly by country.

**Hand hygiene compliance**

Hand rub was the preferred HH action as hand washes only were observed seven times (all after patient contact). The overall HH compliance was 15% regardless of HH indication, but when analysing the data per indication, we found a compliance rate of 3% before patient contact, 2% before clean or aseptic procedures, 8% after the risk of contact with body fluids, 29% after patient contact and 38% after contact with patient surroundings. The compliance rate varied significantly according to the country of origin. The Danish providers had the highest compliance rate regardless of indication (table 2).

**Glove behaviour**

In total, the use of gloves was observed in 720 (54%) of all 1344 indications. New gloves were observed in 48% of all before patient contacts, but only in 14% of all clean or aseptic
procedures. Continuous use of gloves (wearing a pair of gloves through more than one HH indication, for example, after touching a contaminated site, and then returning to the patient) was observed in 21% of the before patient contacts, and in 64% of the observed before clean or aseptic procedures. Moreover, the use of gloves varied significantly by country (table 3).

Adherence to basic hygiene parameters

The adherence to basic hygiene parameters regarding nails, hair and jewellery among the EMS providers was higher than the HH compliance. In total, 83% of the EMS providers had short, clean nails, 99% had short or up done hair, and 62% did not wear jewellery. Furthermore, the adherence by country did not vary significantly, except regarding wearing jewellery (table 4).

Influence of gender and provider level on HH compliance and glove behaviour

HH compliance did not vary by gender (16% men vs 13% women, p=0.175), but by provider level (basic-care providers 21% vs advanced-care providers 12%, p=0.000). Wearing gloves did not vary by gender (male providers 53% vs female providers 53%, p=0.399), but it did vary by provider level (basic-care providers 42% vs advanced-care providers 57%, p=0.000).

Potential risk factors related to lack of HH compliance

HH compliance was observed in 2% of the 720 indications where gloves were worn, whereas it was observed in 30% of the 624 indications where no gloves were worn (p=0.000).

In multivariate analysis, non-compliance with HH was associated with wearing gloves (OR 45; 95% CI 1.1 to 2.4; p=0.007) and with provider level (OR 1.7; 95% CI 1.1 to 2.4; p=0.007), but not with gender (OR 1.3; 95% CI 0.9 to 1.9; p=0.107) (table 5).

DISCUSSION

We found a low HH compliance rate both in general and on a country level. The behaviour of the EMS providers showed a tendency towards self-protection instead of patient protection, that is, with a higher compliance rate after patient contacts than before patient contacts and with an over-reliance on gloves. We observed the use of gloves when there was no apparent need (no observed risk of body fluids, etc). There was also a high rate of continuous use of the same pair of gloves throughout several HH indications. The adherence to hygiene parameters regarding hair, nails and the use of jewellery was better with an overall adherence rate from 62% to 99%, depending on the parameter. Moreover, the risk of non-compliance was related to glove use and provider level.

This multicentre study is the first to assess HH compliance in accordance with WHO recommendations, along with adherence to recommendations regarding hair, nails and jewellery among various EMS professions across multiple countries, and thus providing a broader assessment than seen before. However, this also makes it difficult to compare our results with prior findings.

To the best of our knowledge, only three HH-related observational studies have been conducted in the EMS setting (two American and one Swedish), and these studies also found HH compliance among EMS providers to be suboptimal with a tendency to self-protection. The issue of self-protection has two aspects, both the greater HH compliance after patient contact and the over-reliance of gloves, and therefore it is important to note that HH is about preventing the spread of microbes and thus protecting the patient. Whereas, the use of gloves primarily is about protecting oneself from body fluids, and so on.

The WHO 'Five moments for hand hygiene' may be challenging to comply with in demanding clinical practices, and they may need some simplification to be feasible in the EMS.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provider level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic care</td>
<td>349 (26)</td>
<td>39 (16)</td>
<td>174 (42)</td>
<td>136 (32)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced care</td>
<td>995 (74)</td>
<td>198 (84)</td>
<td>244 (58)</td>
<td>289 (68)</td>
<td>264 (100)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>852 (63)</td>
<td>149 (63)</td>
<td>195 (47)</td>
<td>405 (95)</td>
<td>103 (39)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>492 (37)</td>
<td>88 (37)</td>
<td>223 (53)</td>
<td>20 (5)</td>
<td>161 (61)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1344</td>
<td>198 (15)</td>
<td>25 (11)</td>
<td>54 (13)</td>
<td>104 (24)</td>
<td>15 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before patient contact</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>16 (3)</td>
<td>3 (4)</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
<td>10 (5)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before clean/aseptic</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 (11)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After body fluids</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>10 (8)</td>
<td>3 (13)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6 (19)</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After patient contact</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>142 (29)</td>
<td>16 (21)</td>
<td>48 (32)</td>
<td>69 (42)</td>
<td>9 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After surroundings</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>27 (38)</td>
<td>3 (17)</td>
<td>3 (15)</td>
<td>16 (80)</td>
<td>5 (36)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Also, it is important to remember that although HH is not a complicated procedure, it still needs to be learnt, trained and continually practised before it becomes a routine.

The move towards more advanced and invasive procedures being performed in the EMS setting underpins the need for improvement strategies because poor HH is related to a heavy load of bacteria on the hands, and provides a risk of transmission and subsequently risk of infection. WHO recommends a multimodal approach to HH compliance, and such will imply a variety of strategies in order to clarify both practical and behavioural barriers. As far as we know, only one study has investigated how to improve EMS-related HH, and the authors reported that a theoretically based PowerPoint presentation on HH importance and practice, along with increased access to HH supplies, and visually reminding posters, improved the hygiene awareness and motivation. Also, a recent Australian study reported that situation-based learning had a positive impact on medical students’ knowledge and attitudes towards HH. Future studies elucidating motivational factors in relation to EMS HH compliance are highly recommended to strengthen future multimodal improvement strategies.

**Strengths and limitations of the study**

The fact that our data collection, as the first ever, was conducted across different countries, including both private and public organisations and multiple EMS professions, contributes to the study generalisability. However, although statistically significant results have been attained in some areas, the numbers reported are reasonably low, and thus country-specific interpretation should be made with caution.

Observation of HH compliance is considered ‘the gold standard’, but one must assume that our study design is challenged by the observer influence known as the ‘Hawthorne effect’, where the observed tend to increase their effort to ‘please’ the observer, and there is no doubt that the EMS providers were under some influence of the observers. Nevertheless, it should be considered

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**Table 3** Glove behaviour among emergency medical service providers, overall and per country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before patient contact</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>247 (48)</td>
<td>43 (56)</td>
<td>49 (32)</td>
<td>117 (64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New gloves</td>
<td>105 (21)</td>
<td>19 (25)</td>
<td>21 (14)</td>
<td>16 (9)</td>
<td>49 (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>161 (31)</td>
<td>15 (19)</td>
<td>86 (55)</td>
<td>49 (27)</td>
<td>11 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No gloves</td>
<td>22 (14)</td>
<td>5 (12)</td>
<td>4 (8)</td>
<td>9 (33)</td>
<td>4 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before aseptic/clean</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>101 (64)</td>
<td>31 (72)</td>
<td>25 (47)</td>
<td>14 (52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New gloves</td>
<td>247 (48)</td>
<td>43 (56)</td>
<td>49 (32)</td>
<td>117 (64)</td>
<td>38 (39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>105 (21)</td>
<td>19 (25)</td>
<td>21 (14)</td>
<td>16 (9)</td>
<td>49 (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No gloves</td>
<td>247 (48)</td>
<td>43 (56)</td>
<td>49 (32)</td>
<td>117 (64)</td>
<td>38 (39)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Table 4** Emergency medical service providers’ adherence to hygiene parameters regarding nails, hair and jewellery, overall and per country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clean short nails</td>
<td>64 (83)</td>
<td>15 (75)</td>
<td>19 (95)</td>
<td>18 (90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short/up done hair</td>
<td>76 (99)</td>
<td>20 (100)</td>
<td>19 (95)</td>
<td>20 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No jewellery</td>
<td>48 (62)</td>
<td>9 (45)</td>
<td>14 (70)</td>
<td>20 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSION

HH compliance among EMS providers was remarkably low and higher after patient encounters compared with before patient encounters. In addition, there was an over-reliance on gloves, indicating a tendency towards self-protection instead of patient protection. We recommend further research on contextual challenges and hygiene perceptions among EMS providers to clarify future improvement strategies.

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Contributors

HSV wrote the protocol under supervision of MG, HJK, KS, MC and VL. The planning and execution of data collection were conducted by HSV and SV with support from MC, KS and VL. All statistics were conducted by HSV under the supervision of HJK. Writing the article was done by HSV under the supervision of MG, HJK, KS, MC and VL. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Competing interests

None declared.

Patient consent

Not required.

Ethics approval

All study phases were conducted under strict consideration of the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation was voluntary and all observations anonymised. In Denmark, the study was exempted from specific ethical approval due to the non-interventional nature of the study. Ethical approval in Finland, Sweden and Australia was obtained according to local regulations and local human research ethics committees. All observations prioritised the well-being of the patients.

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Data sharing statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to commercial interests but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Table 5 Risk factors related to lack of hand hygiene* compliance among emergency medical service providers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential risk factors</th>
<th>Observed number of non-compliances</th>
<th>Univariate analysis OR 95% CI P value</th>
<th>Multivariate analysis OR 95% CI P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced-care level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>827/1146</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.4 to 2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing gloves</td>
<td>708/1146</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>14 to 45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Either hand wash or hand rub.

†Including an interaction term between 'wearing gloves and educational level' (interaction non-significant, p=0.309).

‡Either hand wash or hand rub.

§Either hand wash, hand rub, or antimicrobial hand gel.

**Either hand wash or hand rub.

††Either hand wash, hand rub, or antimicrobial hand gel.

¶Either hand wash, hand rub, or antimicrobial hand gel.

©Either hand wash, hand rub, or antimicrobial hand gel.

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§§Either hand wash, hand rub, or antimicrobial hand gel.

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