

**National Hand Hygiene Initiative
Media fact sheet
May 2009**

1. Why is a hand hygiene initiative needed?

An estimated 12,000 blood stream infections associated with health care occur in Australia each year. Of these 12,000 infections, 4,500 are due to *Staphylococcus aureus* blood stream infections (SAB), which include methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), or 'golden staph'. One third of patients with an SAB die within 30 days of infection.

Many of these infections are associated with healthcare procedures and are therefore potentially preventable. The hand hygiene of health care workers is the single greatest opportunity to prevent healthcare associated infections, including 'superbugs'.

2. What are 'superbugs'?

'Superbugs' are bacteria that are resistant to treatment with commonly-prescribed antibiotics. Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) is responsible for difficult to treat infections in humans, and is commonly known as 'golden staph'.

SAB infections, including MRSA, occur most frequently in hospitals and healthcare facilities among patients who have undergone invasive medical procedures or who have weakened immune systems. They are also found in the community. In healthcare settings, *Staphylococcus aureus*, including MRSA, commonly causes seriously and potential life threatening infections, such as bloodstream infections, surgical site infections and pneumonia.

3. What is the National Hand Hygiene Initiative?

The National Hand Hygiene Initiative is a world-first, step-by-step program to improve hand hygiene in hospitals and health services and to monitor hand hygiene compliance among healthcare workers. In order to halve the rate of SAB infections, healthcare workers will use alcohol-based hand rub before and after contact with patients. The National Hand Hygiene Initiative is a world-first because it is the first program that will combine auditing of hand hygiene, credentialling and measurement of SAB across a country's entire healthcare system.

The program also includes a national register of bloodstream infections to compare infection rates between hospitals, states, territories and with other countries.

4. What is the national register of bloodstream infections?

The national register of bloodstream infections is a new system that will encourage best-practice hand hygiene by allowing Australian hospitals to compare infection rates between hospitals, states, territories and with other countries. Every month each state will be required to record their SAB and MRSA infection rates and send them to Hand Hygiene Australia.

5. Who will implement the new hygiene program?

The National Hand Hygiene Initiative will be implemented by Hand Hygiene Australia, and will link current initiatives in all states and territories to bring a coordinated approach to hand hygiene. The Initiative will focus healthcare workers in public hospitals and private hospitals and to develop a standardised national system for hand hygiene compliance. The Commission will work with health educators nationally on the educational aspects of the program.

6. Who will fund the National Hand Hygiene Initiative?

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Healthcare will provide funding over the next three years for the National Hand Hygiene Initiative. States and territories will also contribute to the cost of implementing the program in their healthcare systems.

7. Where and when was the hand hygiene pilot program research conducted?

A multisite hand hygiene pilot was conducted from October 2004 to September 2006 in six Victorian health care institutions, starting at the Austin Hospital in Melbourne. After the pilot program, a Victoria-wide hand hygiene initiative was rolled out across more than 800 Victorian hospitals in March 2006, funded by a \$2.5 million grant from the Victorian Quality Commission. The *Medical Journal of Australia* research paper is based on this Victoria-wide program.

The research paper 'Significant reductions in methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteraemia and clinical isolates associated with a multisite, hand hygiene culture-change program and subsequent successful statewide roll-out' by Grayson et al appears in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, Volume 188 Number 11, 2 June 2008. It was recently awarded the Australian Medical Association of Victoria Sir Richard Stawell Memorial Prize for best paper and the Wyeth Award from the Medical Journal of Australia.

8. How is the World Health Organization involved?

The World Health Organization (WHO) developed 'Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care' as part of its Global Patient Safety Challenge. They provide health care workers, hospital administrators and health authorities with the best scientific evidence and recommendations to improve practices and reduce health care associated infections. The National Hand Hygiene Initiative is based on these guidelines.

9. What is Save Lives: Clean Your Hands Day?

Save Lives: Clean Your Hands Day on 5 May is part of the WHO global movement to improve hand hygiene and reduce healthcare associated infections. To date, 119 countries have committed to improving hand hygiene practices.

10. What about Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci (VRE) and other 'superbugs'?

The Commission will not be measuring VRE or other antibiotic resistant infections as part of this Initiative. However the Initiative's strategies to reduce SAB infections *will* decrease the number of other infections including VRE. Although, VRE is a serious problem but does not have the same death rate as SAB and is currently more difficult to measure.

11. What is Hand Hygiene Australia?

Hand Hygiene Australia has been engaged by the Australian Commission on Quality and Safety in Health Care (ACSQHC) to implement the National Hand Hygiene Initiative. Hand Hygiene Australia is 100 per cent funded by and reports to the ACSQHC, and is directed by Professor Lindsay Grayson. Hand Hygiene Australia is working closely with all health departments to maximise the success of the National Hand Hygiene Initiative.

12. What is the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care?

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care is funded by, and reports directly to, all Australian Health Ministers'. The Commission works closely with all States and Territories, public and private hospitals, and primary care providers. The Commission leads and coordinates improvement in safety and quality in health care in Australia by identifying issues and policy directions, recommending priorities for action disseminating knowledge, and advocating for safety and quality.

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For more details contact Amy Winter on 02 9263 3605 or visit www.safetyandquality.gov.au