

Elevating the Role of Cleaners in Healthcare Facilities: A Guidance Note

Compiled by Hayley Schram and Lindsay Denny, Global Water 2020 (June 2021)

We cannot continue to neglect cleaners in the healthcare setting.

A safe healthcare environment is essential to protect patient, staff, and visitor health and prevent the spread of healthcare-acquired infections (HAIs). HAIs are estimated to affect 15% of all hospitalized patients in low- and middle-income countries and are the leading cause of death among hospitalized patients.¹ According to the most recent JMP data, 26% of healthcare facilities (HCFs) in low- and middle-income countries lack access to basic water services, 22% lack basic sanitation, 16% lack handwashing facilities, and 40% do not follow proper waste segregation procedures.^{2,3}

Cleaners are the primary personnel responsible for ensuring safe environmental health conditions for patients and staff, yet they have been continuously overlooked as a key stakeholder among healthcare professionals. Cleaners are responsible for cleaning and disinfecting frequently contaminated surfaces, such as bed rails and doorknobs, as well as sweeping, dusting, and mopping the floors of the healthcare facility, and tasks such as waste disposal and laundry and linen management. They often obtain inadequate training, receive low pay, lack sufficient cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE), and experience stigma from patients and staff. In addition, their role is often thought of as informal work and their perspectives and views are rarely taken into consideration by HCF management. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of cleanliness, yet cleaners are repeatedly left out of the conversation.

Below is a list of actions that partners, including government, civil society, advocates, and donors, can undertake to elevate the critical role cleaners play in maintaining healthcare safety:

- **Training:** Organize both orientation and refresher trainings for cleaners on WASH, IPC, PPE, hand hygiene, and COVID-19 response, tailored to their responsibilities within the healthcare facility. Training modality should be appropriate for the level of education and literacy of cleaners.
- **Supplies:** Solidify supply chains for consumable resources, including PPE, cleaning cloths, disinfectants (e.g., chlorine), mops and buckets, soap (bar or liquid), and detergent.
- **Handwashing:** Ensure that cleaners have access to handwashing facilities, including set up handwashing facilities, like a bucket with a tap with soap, throughout the facility.
- **Job Descriptions:** Provide official job descriptions and improved contracts at the facility level for all cleaners. In doing so, cleaners and their supervisors will be clear on the scope of their work and what tasks lie outside of their job description.
- **Budget:** Advocate for budgets to include salaries for cleaners at all healthcare facility types, as well as funds for cleaning supplies and PPE.
- **Policies & Protocols:** Encourage and support the Ministry of Health to develop environmental health policies and protocols that include environmental cleaning and cleanliness for healthcare facilities, including delivery settings. These protocols should include step-by-step cleaning instructions and a cleaning roster or schedule.
- **Auditing:** Conduct audits of the current inventory and availability of cleaning supplies and PPE. Determine which cleaning materials are essential to a clean and safe healthcare environment and package them as a “cleaning bundle” to prioritize their availability and importance.
- **Monitoring:** Implement routine (consistent) monitoring of cleaning practices using a standardized methodology across the entire facility and individual ward. Ensure that feedback is given to cleaning staff and program leadership based on the monitoring results.
- **Indicators & Mechanisms:** Encourage the establishment of IPC and environmental cleaning indicators to be integrated within a national monitoring system, along with a mechanism to collect and process the strategies and goals. Additionally, encourage national facility-level monitoring, using tools like WHO’s WASH FIT, IPCAF, and IPCAT2.
- **Hygiene/Safety Culture:** Encourage a culture of hygiene and safety at the facility. Emphasize that cleaners and maintenance staff are part of a team working to prevent the spread of infection. Recognize high-performing cleaners for their work.
- **Performance-based incentives:** Recommend the introduction of incentives for cleaners based on their work performance to improve morale and highlight their importance in the facility (e.g. Ethiopia CASH program and the Clean Clinic Approach).
- **Committee Involvement:** Encourage healthcare facility management staff to take input from cleaners by involving them in IPC committees, COVID-19 meetings, and WASHFIT teams.

¹Allegranzi, B., Nejad, S. B., Combescure, C., Graafmans, W., Attar, H., Donaldson, L., & Pittet, D. (2011). Burden of endemic health-care-associated infection in developing countries: systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet*, 377(9761), 228-241.

² Cronk, R., & Bartram, J. (2018). Environmental conditions in health care facilities in low- and middle-income countries: Coverage and inequalities. *International Journal of Hygiene and Environmental Health*, 221(3), 409–422.

³ WHO, & UNICEF. (2019). *WASH in health care facilities: global baseline report 2019*.

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In Summary

One of the largest constraints that cleaners experience is the lack of WASH, and formal training on IPC, PPE, and hand hygiene. A needs assessment study conducted in 56 healthcare facilities throughout Bangladesh, India, The Gambia, and Zanzibar reported that on average less than a third delivered formal training to their cleaning staff.⁴ Training is essential in ensuring a safe and clean healthcare environment, in establishing sustainable continuity of services, and providing a line of defense against COVID-19. The healthcare environment is innately linked to WASH and IPC and there is a clear need to empower these forgotten actors by creating awareness among key stakeholders, by providing cleaners with the necessary training and supplies, and by addressing institutional hurdles. In doing so, we ensure respect for cleaners and the public they serve and move forward and ensuring a cleaner, safer, and more dignified healthcare environment for all who visit.

Resources Regarding Environmental Cleaning in Healthcare Facilities



Reports and toolkits:

[Best Practices for Environmental Cleaning in Healthcare Facilities: in Resource-Limited Settings](#) available in [[French](#)], [[Spanish](#)], and [[Portuguese](#)] (CDC/ICAN, 2019)

This document was developed as a collaboration between the CDC and the Infection Control Africa Network (ICAN) and discusses best practices that can be used in every major department or service in healthcare facilities, including protocols, policies, and monitoring.

[TEACH CLEAN](#) Package (The Soapbox Collaborative, 2019)

This package includes information and materials required to deliver comprehensive, participatory training on safe environmental cleaning. It is freely available and includes seven modules addressing IPC and environmental hygiene.



[Water and Sanitation for Health Facility Improvement Tool \(WASH FIT\)](#) available in [[French](#)], [[Spanish](#)], [[Arabic](#)], and [[Russian](#)] (WHO/UNICEF, 2018)

WASH FIT is a risk-based, continuous improvement framework for undertaking WASH improvements as part of wider quality improvements and includes indicators for environmental cleanliness for incremental improvement at the health facility level.

[Guidelines on Core Components of IPC Programmes at the National and Acute Health Care Facility Level](#) available in [[French](#)] and [[Spanish](#)] (WHO, 2016)

This document by WHO provides new guidelines on the core components of IPC programs to prevent current and future threats and to strengthen health service resilience.

[IPC Assessment Framework at the Facility Level](#) tool (WHO, 2018)

This tool is designed to support the implementation of the WHO *Guidelines on Core Components of IPC Programmes* at the healthcare facility level.

[Essential Environmental Health Standards in Health Care](#) available in [[French](#)], [[Spanish](#)], and [[Russian](#)] (WHO, 2008)

This document addresses essential environmental health standards required for health-care settings in medium- and low-resource countries to assess current situations, develop safety standards, and support the development of national policies.

⁴ Cross, S., Gon, G., Morrison, E., Afsana, K., Ali, S. M., Manjang, T., ... Graham, W. J. (2019). An invisible workforce: the neglected role of cleaners in patient safety on maternity units. *Global Health Action*, 12(1).

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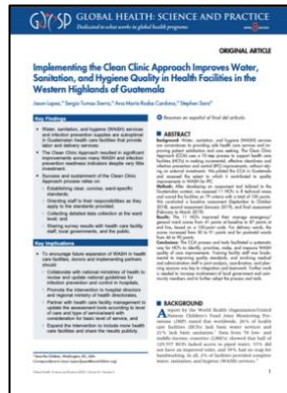
Case Studies:

[WASH in Healthcare Facilities: Practical Steps to Achieve Universal Access to Quality Care](#) (WHO/UNICEF, 2019)

This case study focuses on how the United Republic of Tanzania is training cleaners to improve hygiene in healthcare facilities using the TEACH CLEAN training package.

[Clean and Timely Care in Hospital for Institutional Transformation \(CATCH-IT\) Project](#) (Ethiopia Ministry of Health, 2019)

This government-led initiative has tied WASH and environmental hygiene to quality improvement throughout the healthcare system.



Articles/blogs/op-eds:

- [Time for a renewed focus on the role of cleaners in achieving safe health care in low- and middle-income countries](#) (Storr et al., 2021)
- [The importance of recognizing those who clean as key contributors to health care](#) (One Drop, June 2021)
- [Implementing the Clean Clinic Approach Improves WASH Quality in Healthcare Facilities in the Western Highlands of Guatemala](#) (Lopez et al., 2020)
- [Unveiling the Invisible Who Serve the Frontline of Healthcare](#) (Global Health Council, 2020)
- [The invisible workforce: the neglected role of cleaners in patient safety on maternity units](#) (Cross et al., 2019)



Webinars:

Global Webinar Series on WASH in HCFs, CGSW at Emory University:
[The Role of Cleaners: Neglected Frontline WASH Workers in Healthcare Facilities](#)

WHO & UNICEF WASH in Healthcare Facilities Webinar Series:
[Environmental cleaning in the context of COVID-19](#)

CDC's Infection Prevention and Control webinar series:
[Environmental cleaning in healthcare facilities in the context of COVID-19](#)