Commentary

Ailsa Clarke, BSc, MSc, PGCEA, ILTM, is an Associate Lecturer, EIHMS, University of Surrey, Guildford. She acted as the research project supervisor for Heather’s research.

The issues raised in this small-scale study have implications for both child health nursing and the health profession as a whole.

The study identifies that current cleaning of stethoscope diaphragms is inadequate and recommends guidelines for their cleaning and storage. Whether the diaphragm should be cleaned with alcohol wipes or covered with a disposable cover is debatable. Evidence from other countries might be useful. Certainly there is a need for compliance amongst users.

A further issue is where stethoscopes should be stored. The study identified that they do not stay with the corresponding child or in their designated room. This has implications for cross-infection, although there is limited evidence that micro-organisms may be transferred from child to child through an unclean stethoscope diaphragm. Additionally the microbial load could be related to the frequency of use and how often and with what the stethoscope is cleaned. This area requires further research prior to and following the introduction of a cleaning protocol.

Another nursing implication is whether health care professionals should carry personal stethoscopes and be responsible for cleaning them between patients and whether every room/child should have their own stethoscope.

In conclusion, this important aspect of infection control challenges practice with regard to stethoscope use, cleaning and storage.

References

Bernard, L., Kereveur, A., Durand, D., Gonot, J., Goldstein, F., Mainardi, J.L., Acar, J. and Carlet, J. (1999) ‘Bacterial Contamination of Hospital Physicians’ Stethoscopes’, Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology 20(9): 626–7.

Charter, D. & Studd, H. (2001) ‘One in Three Hospital Wards “Filthy”’, The Times, 6 January.

Coello, R., Glenister, H., Fereres, J., Bartlett, C., Leigh, D., Sedgwick, J. and Cooke, E.M. (1993) ‘The Cost of Infection in Surgical Patients: A Case-control Study’, Journal of Hospital Infection 25: 87–106.

Gallagher, R. (1999) ‘Infection Control: Public Health, Clinical Effectiveness and Education’, British Journal of Nursing 8(18): 1212–14.

Gerken, A., Cavanagh, S. and Winner, H.I. (1972) ‘Infection Hazard From Stethoscopes in Hospital’, The Lancet 3: 1211–1215.

House of Commons Accounts Committee (2000) Attachment 4: Hospital Acquired Infection: Public Health Importance [UK]. Available online: http://www.parliament.the-stationary-off...cm200001/cmselecmhealth/30/30ap38.htm [Accessed 14/09/2001].

Nunez, S., Moreno, A., Green, K. and Villar, J. (2000) ‘The Stethoscope in the Emergency Department: A Vector of Infection?’, Epidemiology and Infection 124: 233–7.