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Restrooms: Xing Out Contamination

By Angelo Poneris — posted 08/01/2007

Those who watched The Oprah Winfrey Show that day in April 2004 were probably a bit shocked by it all—and I’m not talking about the episode where Tom Cruise went crazy on Oprah’s couch or the day she gave everyone in the studio audience a new car.

On the show I’m referring to, Oprah invited New York University microbiologist and immunologist Philip Tierno to talk about his new book, *The Secret Life of Germs*. Discussed in the book and on the show that morning was the continuing problem of cross-contamination in the United States and throughout the world.

According to Tierno, 80 percent of all infectious diseases are spread through direct or indirect cross-contamination, from hand shakes to the simple touching of door handles. He defines cross-contamination as the spreading of germs and bacteria between people, from touching food, tools, equipment, and surfaces.

Tierno points out that, in addition to its potential impact on the health of building occupants and visitors, cross-contamination costs businesses and schools billions of dollars every year. More than US\$60 billion in productivity alone is lost in the United States annually due to the problem. And because of the rise in cross-contamination caused illnesses, many employee health insurance premiums have gone up significantly. Further, since public school funding is often based on student attendance, many schools are receiving fewer funds because of sick—and hence absent—children.

Although the problem exists everywhere—in shopping malls, offices, schools, and other facilities—some of Tierno’s major culprits include:

- Public restrooms
- Remote controls in hotel rooms
- Touch screens on ATM machines
- Escalator handrails
- Various surfaces at theaters and stadiums
- Hand rails, seats, and other surfaces on buses, trains, and taxis.

No. 1 Culprit

Cross-contamination is perhaps most rampant in public restrooms. Obviously, proper hand washing remains one of the most effective ways to prevent germ transmission in these areas, but studies continue to show that large numbers of people do not wash their hands after restroom use.

Facility managers and their janitor distributors can do little to control people’s hand-washing practices (other than prominently placing signage to remind patrons of its

importance). However, selecting restroom fixtures that promote hygiene—largely because they do not need to be touched—is helping to reduce the problem. These fixtures include “touchless” urinals, toilets, sinks, and paper towel dispensers.

Still, in the majority of situations, the most significant way to limit restroom cross-contamination is through proper and effective cleaning. And it appears that most people believe it to be the responsibility of cleaning professionals to keep the facilities they use hygienic and free from germs.

Indeed, according to a poll conducted by the Opinion Research Corp., 40 percent of those surveyed believe improved facility health and hygiene is the chief job and duty of cleaning professionals. The same survey reported that what “grosses out” most people about workplace restrooms and raises concerns about cross-contamination are:

- Dirty toilets
- Empty soap dispensers or lack of paper supplies
- Dirty sinks, counters, and dispensers
- Odors that make people feel as though they are breathing in germs.

Implementing a Program

As with so many situations, problems often present new opportunities. And when it comes to reducing cross-contamination, janitor distributors can play a crucial role in helping their customers’ facilities stay healthy.

Performing an audit of all the cleaning products, equipment, and systems used to maintain a facility is one of the first steps distributors can take. Although restrooms are the major cross-contamination culprit, the audit should look at the overall facility and steps that have—or have not—been incorporated to protect the facility’s health. Among the questions to ask are the following:

- Are clean, high-performance matting systems in place at all building entries? These trap and prevent contaminants from entering the facility.
- Are “greener” vacuums, extractors, and floor machines in use? This equipment helps protect indoor air quality and prevents the growth of mold and mildew.
- Is the janitorial crew aware of the cross-contamination problem and how serious it can be? Education on the subject as well as the cleaning and health connection should be ongoing, especially in larger facilities.
- Is the janitorial crew aware of the “hot zones” for cross-contamination in a facility? For instance, just about any restroom surface that’s frequently touched becomes a hot zone for the spread of germs.
- What type of cleaning products and systems are in place and are they being used effectively? In many situations, cross-contamination remains a persistent problem because the same cleaning systems, products, and technologies are incorporated even though they are proving ineffective.

The Science of Cleaning

Once the audit is complete, distributors working with facility managers and custodial crews should take a very serious look at the facility’s cleaning and maintenance to see where steps can be incorporated not only to reduce cross-contamination and protect occupant

health, but also to prove that this has indeed been accomplished.

In restrooms, one way to do this is to test for urine on a variety of surfaces, including fixtures, floors, and even walls and door handles. When urine is present on these surfaces, it's often an indication of just how far germs and bacteria can spread in a facility. Urine-detection kits made specifically for the cleaning industry are available, easy to use, and relatively inexpensive. They can also be used to help establish custodial benchmarking and even "proof of service," indicating the cleanliness of an area should questions arise.

Additionally, adding science to cleaning often requires evaluating the conventional technologies used to clean facilities. For example, recent independent studies conducted by a jansan manufacturer and a leading facility service provider—scheduled to be presented to the Cleaning Industry Research Institute in 2007—have questioned the value of some conventional restroom mopping systems regarding soil and contaminant removal (see sidebar below).

Custodial Training

The importance of training in cross-contamination prevention cannot be overstated. Programs that properly train workers in healthy cleaning procedures are invaluable. And here again, the jansan distributor can play a vital role by helping to educate and train these workers.

The health and cleaning connection has never been more obvious than now—due to the health problems associated with cross-contamination. Training, adding science to cleaning, and evaluating cleaning procedures are among the necessary steps to stem the crisis.

And now that ISSA has developed the [Cleaning Industry Management Standard \(CIMS\)](#), the entire process can be easier. CIMS can help distributors train cleaning professionals on accepted, well-tested management systems and procedures that, when implemented, can help promote well-maintained and healthy facilities.

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