Healthcare-associated infections (HAI) affect hundreds of millions of individuals worldwide. Performing hand hygiene is widely accepted as a key strategy of infection prevention and control (IPC) to prevent HAI, as healthcare workers’ contaminated hands are the vehicle most often implicated in the cross-transmission of pathogens in healthcare” Vermeil et al (2018).

Abstract:

Healthcare-associated infections (HAI) affect hundreds of millions of individuals worldwide. Performing hand hygiene is widely accepted as a key strategy of infection prevention and control (IPC) to prevent HAI, as healthcare workers’ contaminated hands are the vehicle most often implicated in the cross-transmission of pathogens in healthcare. In the last 20 years, a paradigm shift has occurred in hand hygiene: the change from handwashing with soap and water to using alcohol-based hand rubs. In order to put this revolution into context and understand how such a change was able to be implemented across so many different cultures and geographic regions, it is useful to understand how the idea of hygiene in general and hand hygiene specifically developed. This paper aims to examine how ideas about hygiene and hand hygiene evolved from ancient to modern times, from a ubiquitous but local set of ideas to a global phenomenon. It reviews historical landmarks from the first known documented recipe for soap by the Babylon civilization to the discovery of chlorine, and significant contributions by pioneers such as Antoine Germain Labarraque, Alexander Gordon, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Ignaz Philip Semmelweis, Louis Pasteur and Joseph Lister. It recalls that soap and water handwashing appeared in guidelines to prevent HAI in the 1980’s, describes why alcohol-based handrub replaced it as the central tool for action within a multimodal improvement strategy, and looks at how the World Health Organization and other committed stakeholders, governments and dedicated IPC staff are championing hand hygiene globally.

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