

Online courses boost infection control skills that could prove vital in a pandemic

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Online courses are helping staff to develop the skills they need to tackle hospital-acquired infections, such as MRSA and *C.difficile*, and this expertise could also prove vital in a pandemic, according to a study published in the latest issue of the UK-based *Journal of Advanced Nursing*.

Nursing and healthcare staff who took part in a specially developed online infection control course said that it had improved their infection control procedures and the advice they gave to patients, visitors and other staff. A number of them had also recommended changes to their department or hospital, which had been adopted.

When they were surveyed before the course, participants gave their competency in this area an average score of 64 per cent. This rose by nearly a fifth to just over 77 per cent after they had completed the course.

87 per cent said that they had found the course useful and relevant to their workplace and had already changed their behaviour as a result.

76 per cent said their organisation was fairly supportive when staff suggested changes or improvements and that they had the flexibility to allow new infection control measures to be adopted.

And 85 per cent felt that the online course would be seen as a positive way to support infection control procedures.

Other feedback suggested that the format of the course, which included videos and interactive quizzes, enhanced the learning experience.

Sixty-seven staff from three large teaching hospitals and a small community hospital in Canada completed questionnaires before and after the course, which covered three key areas: hand hygiene, routine practices and the chain of transmission.

Just under a half of them were registered nurses and the remainder included pharmacists, physiotherapists, nurse educators and nursing students.

A third had more than 20 years' healthcare experience and a further third had less than five years' experience. Just under half (49 per cent) had used online learning before and the majority (97 per cent) had intermediate or advanced computer skills.

"All the participants said that the course was extremely helpful and that they would recommend online learning as a way of improving infection control skills" says Professor Lynda Attack from the School of Health Studies at Centennial College in Ontario, Canada.

The healthcare professionals who took part in the course reported a number of ways in which their behaviour had changed or they had sought to influence the procedures adopted in their department. These include:

- Paying more attention to the need for personal hand hygiene.
- Improving the use of personal protective clothing and ensuring that patients and visitors do the same.
- Increasing glove use and wearing eye protection more frequently.
- Asking for better-equipped isolation carts to be provided, together with hand sanitisers in non-clinical areas of the hospital.

-- Re-examining waste disposal processes and more appropriate glove use in the labs.

The authors argue that infection control is vital amid growing international concerns about the rising rate of hospital-acquired infections such as MRSA and *C.difficile*. These frequently result in ill health or death and put major pressure on healthcare costs.

"International travel and bacterial resistance are also global health issues and these draw attention to the need for improved infection control" says Professor Attack.

"The Canadian organisations that managed the SARS outbreak have also raised major concerns about the limited availability of infection control experts and courses to train or retrain healthcare staff in basic infection control procedures.

"There is global consensus about this gap and the need for greater emphasis on infection control in healthcare settings."

It was those concerns that led researchers to develop, and test out, the online course in infection control procedures.

"The results of our study show that online learning can be an effective way to enhance knowledge and skills in infection control procedures" concludes Professor Attack, who carried out the study with Dr Robert Luke, Director of the Office of Applied Research at George Brown College, Ontario.

"However, we are keen to point out that the online course was never intended to replace hands-on practice and that these courses will be most effective when they are used to complement existing workplace sessions."

Professor Attack also stresses that adopting online learning for staff is more complex than simply putting courses on the Internet.

"Organisations need to proactively consider a number of factors to ensure that staff can make best use of online learning, including computer access and having sufficient time and technical skills to do the courses" she says.

"It is equally important to ensure that organisations provide healthcare professionals with the support they need after the course, to ensure that they can improve their infection control procedures. They should also be encouraged to suggest and influence changes in their working environment."

Source: Wiley

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