Founding Fathers of Restoration

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Effective Cleaning & Health – Part 3: Practical Tips

This month's article is a sequel to two foundation pieces by Dr. Michael Berry and published in the January and February 2007 issues of Cleaning & Restoration. I want to provide some practical tips and knowledge about cleaning, health and hygiene as I understand them. We will hear of the “toilet sneeze,” contaminated restroom wash basins and faucets, toilet door handles, alcohol sanitizers, microbe containing ties and scarves, and more. I voice, however, several qualifications at the outset so that my approach is clear.

First, I am not a microbiologist or public health expert. What I convey are learned issues, science and research findings from those who are the experts. Second, this topic is vital to debating why cleaning science, cleaning for health plus hygiene, and effective cleaning or high performance cleaning are critical issues. Using practical examples I aim to further interest our readers in different aspects of cleaning science and health.

**Avian Flu, H5N1, Nosocomial Infections, Hanta Virus, SARS and More**

It’s a microbe laden world out there and has been so for millennia. One hears of threats and worries concerning the health implications of Avian or H5N1 flu virus, SARS infections, gastro-intestinal virus and infectious transmission on cruise ships, life threatening nosocomial infections, MRSA and other methicillin or drug resistant infections in hospitals and health care. Antimicrobial resistant (AMR) microbes and misuse or overuse of antibiotics is ever growing. Hanta virus in dust threatens cleaning personnel. There is a risk of HIV/AIDS exposure among cleaners and restorers who handle trauma scene cleanup; and recently, the issue of herpes transmission among college wrestlers arose. It’s impressive how well adult immune systems actually function in light of such environments and circumstances.

However, in the absence of effective medication or vaccines to control an epidemic or threatened pandemic while dealing with high threat infectious conditions, or when working to minimize transmission of any infectious agents, proper cleaning, sanitation and hygiene are critical. Isolation, where possible, from infectious persons and microbes, avoidance of high contact surfaces, and effective cleaning (both personal hygiene and otherwise) are excellent strategies for minimizing one’s risk.

These topics arose from information and conversations based on close working relationships among the Science Advisory Council (SAC) to the Cleaning Industry Research Institute (CIRI). Comprising this group are some of the brightest scientists, microbiologists, biologists and public health specialists in the industry — each with a keen interest and expertise in cleaning science, cleaning effectiveness, and its relationship to health, hygiene and sanitation. You can also find a complete listing and links to the bios of the CIRI science advisors on its website.

I have the privilege of serving as chair of this science advisory group, following Mike Berry who chaired this SAC science group during 2006. What follows are a series of what I believe are science-based regimens, sound suggestions for your family, clients and customers on cleanliness and health. You should also regularly check the Centers for Disease Control and other reputable websites for their guidance and prescriptions for avoiding transmission and infectious disease.
The Toilet “Sneeze”

There has been published research concerning aerosols or small vapor borne particles becoming airborne from a toilet during the flushing cycle. If e-coli or other transmittable microorganisms become airborne and rise up to the breathing zone, it’s conceivable they might be inhaled. Although the risk is very small, it has been reported. So what can you do to eliminate this potential risk? Just close the toilet seat cover before and during the flush cycle. Or if in a public facility without toilet seat covers, move slightly away from the toilet area as the flush proceeds.

Public Restroom Hygiene and Contaminated Surfaces

You’ve now flushed the public toilet, or it did so automatically, and you proceed to the wash basins. Where are the high or highest concentrations of microbes in a busy or unclean restroom? You tend to think of toilet surfaces as the riskiest, but actually the wash basins, faucet handles and fixtures contain an equal or often higher microbial content. So what to do? Be careful when using these fixtures and/or touching the basin counters with your hands. Wash thoroughly and then move directly to the drying station for paper or hot air hand drying. Surveys have shown that women tend to less often utilize the hand washing facilities in public restrooms. At first a bit surprising, I wonder if they knew something I did not about the level of microbial contamination among improperly or irregularly cleaned restroom surfaces.

What About Those Toilet and Restroom Door Handles?

You’re about to leave the restaurant toilet, having carefully washed up before the meal. But you have to reach for the knob or handle on the toilet door to exit, touched by everyone else that day who exited before you. How to avoid touching a contaminated door handle and then proceeding to eat a meal? For
one, use the paper towel which you dried with, or better a fresh piece, to contact the door knob or handle and then discard it in the waste bin. What if no waste receptacle is nearby? With the door propped open, carry the toweling out with you and discard it outside the toilet or restroom.

But what about those many restrooms, including airports and major public facilities, that have no waste receptacle by the exit or nearby outside? I’ve done this strange contortion to open the toilet door with paper in hand, then twist back to locate a receptacle to reach for or try for a “3-pointer” into the basket. “Forget that” I’ve been told when it relates to busy public occupancies. “Just throw your paper toweling on the floor at the exit. The facility managers will (eventually) learn that they need to place a new waste paper receptacle or trash bin just by the exit.”

Don’t Wipe or Open Door Handles With Your Tie, Scarf or Muffler!

In discussion with others on such topics, I’ve heard people proudly announce that they use one’s tie, muffler or if a woman, her scarf or hankie, to open public door handles, taxi doors, toilet and restroom handles. I’ve been told that such practices can lead to one potentially having, with repeated practice, one’s favorite tie, scarf or hankie possibly contaminated with microbes from the same high contact surfaces. I know a New Yorker who may possess a potentially contaminated, very high value Italian cashmere scarf — having been used as the “wiper” to open numerous NYC taxi door handles: a self-defeating purpose?

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References