



In this day and age, with the latest in medical equipment and scientific advances adding quantity and quality to our lives, it is easy to forget that the simplest actions can provide some of the most important results. In fact, your mother's instructions to wash up before dinner should be considered some of the soundest medical advice ever offered.

Handwashing, if done correctly and regularly, is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of communicable diseases. The fact that a good thorough scrubbing of the hands can prevent illness is not a new concept — Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis, a Hungarian doctor serving in a Viennese maternity clinic, proved that it worked more than 150 years ago. Unfortunately, we sometimes forget the lesson he taught.

The H1N1 swine influenza virus that appeared in Mexico in April and quickly spread across the globe proves that our world is getting smaller and that preventing the spread of viruses is getting more difficult. While this is obviously of great concern, it is important to remember that it is not just high-profile pandemics such as the swine flu that pose a threat. Common seasonal flu kills 700 to 2,500 people every year in Canada, far more than the H1N1 virus or SARS.

Flu and other respiratory infections are transmitted from person to person when germs enter the nose or throat. Coughs and sneezes release these germs into the air, where they can be breathed in by others. Germs can also be found on the surfaces we touch, such as doorknobs, and our hands can transmit them to the respiratory system when we touch our mouth or nose. Therefore, it is critical that these surfaces be kept as clean as possible.

In the six years since SARS took the lives of 44 Canadians and more than 700 people worldwide,



health officials around the globe have been working to prepare for the next pandemic.

In Canada, the biggest change since then has been the establishment of the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), in part as a response to the SARS outbreak. The creation of this new body in 2004 was important because it established a centre of expertise at the federal level that allows for closer interaction between federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments when a pandemic threatens.

Our response to pandemics has changed a lot thanks to the power of the Internet and modern media. Consider what happened during the Spanish influenza pandemic, which reached Canada in 1918. There was no way to spread information rapidly, so public health officials had to rely on newspapers and posted notices to keep the public and physicians informed. This created huge problems as the pandemic spread across the country.

Today, physicians are connected as never before and have immediate access to the updates and clinical information they need to ensure that you get the care you need. This access is a key issue for the Canadian Medical Association. Through collaboration with the PHAC and other bodies, we strive to ensure that clinical information spreads faster than the viruses that threaten us and that your physician always has access to the latest and best clinical information.

In the meantime, remember your mother's advice: cover coughs, wash your hands and stay home when you're sick.

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