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Are Providers Paying Attention to mHealth Hygiene?

A French study finds almost 40 percent of mobile phones in one hospital carrying traces of a virus - and not the electronic kind.
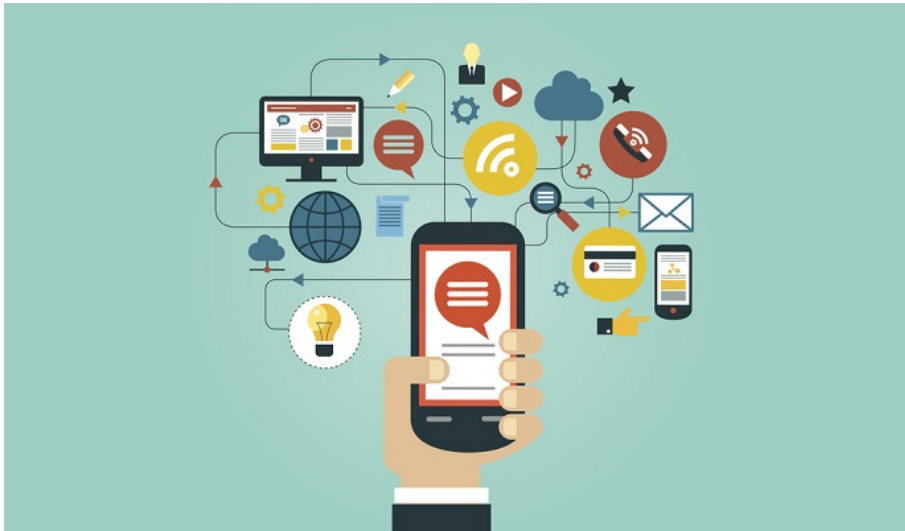
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By Eric Wicklund (mailto:ewicklund@xtelligentmedia.com)

June 24, 2016 - That smartphone in the hands of a doctor or nurse may not be a sanitary as you think.

A study conducted at one French hospital uncovered traces of viral RNA on almost 40 percent of devices, while a corresponding survey indicated 20 percent of hospital staff admitted they never follow hand hygiene protocols.

And those numbers trended higher in pediatric settings.

The study, conducted by Sylvie Pillet and a team of researchers of the Laboratory of Infectious Agents and Hygiene at the University Hospital of Saint-Étienne in France, focused in mobile and cordless phones used by 114 staff members at the hospital. As such, she said the sample size was too small and not sufficient to connect the dots between mobile devices and a risk of infection to patients.

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Still, the results – **published in the May issue of** *Clinical Microbiology and Infection*
**(http://www.clinicalmicrobiologyandinfection.com/article/S1198-743X(15)01034-
4/abstract)**, the official journal of the European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious
Diseases (ESCMID) - may be enough to give healthcare executives on both sides of the Atlantic
cause for concern.

While **the Joint Commission (https://www.jointcommission.org/hai.aspx)** and other
governing bodies have strict standards in place for cleaning and sterilizing devices in healthcare
settings, mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets are sometimes overlooked – especially
in a BYOD environment.

Experts say the recent strides made in hand hygiene protocols should be extended to mobile
devices.

The study's authors pointed out that past research had found that mobile phones are "potential
reservoirs of nosocomial bacteria," but little research had been done on the potential for these
devices to retain traces of a virus. They also wanted to gain a clearer picture of the habits of staff
members using these phones.

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"The majority of healthcare workers (64 percent) used their mobile phones during patient care, which was expected," Elizabeth Botelho-Nevers, a co-author of the study, told newsmedical.net. "However, it was surprising that 20 percent of them admitted never carrying out any hand hygiene procedures, either before or after using their phone, even though all said they knew phones could harbor pathogens."

According the researchers, mobile devices were tested for traces of viral RNA, such as "potentially epidemic respiratory viruses (influenza A and B, respiratory syncytial virus and human metapneumovirus) and the common enteric viruses rotavirus and norovirus." At the same time, hospital staff were asked to fill out a questionnaire detailing when and where each mobile device was used. Both the tests and surveys were blinded.

The study found that 38.5 percent of the devices contained traces of viral RNA, with 39 of 109 devices testing positive for the rotavirus, three devices testing positive for respiratory syncytial virus and one device showing traces of human metapneumovirus. None of the devices showed traces of influenza or norovirus.

While highlighting the fact that one-fifth of the staff weren't following disinfection protocols, the survey also found that phones were cleaned and disinfected less frequently in pediatric wards than in adult wards.

"A multivariate analysis demonstrated a significant association between the presence of viral RNA and the mobile phones of healthcare workers in the pediatric department," Botelho-Nevers, said, adding that the study should "encourage hospitals to step up hand hygiene protocols and to institute better protocols for cleaning and disinfecting both mobile phones and hospital phones."

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