

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

Handshake-free hospital

Anna Gorman

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Dr. Mark Sklansky, a self-described germaphobe, can't stop thinking about how quickly those little microbes can spread.

"If I am at a computer terminal or using a phone or opening a door, I know my hands are now contaminated, and I need to be careful and I need to wash my hands," said Sklansky, professor of pediatrics at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA.

Not all health workers are so careful, despite strict hand-washing policies in virtually all medical facilities. A 2010 study published in the journal *Infection Control & Hospital Epidemiology* showed that only about 40 percent of doctors and other health care providers complied with hand hygiene rules in hospitals.

Sklansky decided to test a new method at UCLA for limiting the spread of germs and reducing the transmission of disease: a handshake-free zone.

"We are trying to do everything to minimize hospital-acquired infection except for the most obvious and easiest thing to do in my opinion, which is to stop shaking hands," he said.

Hospital-acquired infections are a serious and potentially life-threatening problem in hospitals, and the unwashed hands of health care workers are often to blame. On any given day, 1 in 25 patients across the U.S. suffers from at least one infection ac-

quired while they are in the hospital, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

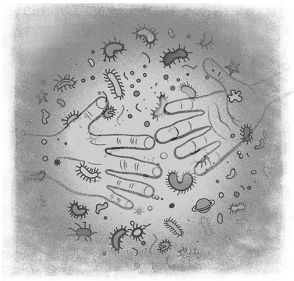
Sklansky first proposed the concept of handshake-free zones in a 2014 editorial published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

In 2015, Sklansky decided to try out the idea with a six-month experiment. He picked a place where patients are especially vulnerable — the neonatal intensive care unit. Infections among infants can cause them pain, prolong their stay in NICU, require more medications and even put them at risk of dying.

The anti-handshake experiment took place at two of UCLA's NICUs. Sklansky and his colleagues explained to the staff and families the purpose of handshake-free zones and posted signs designating the new zones.

They didn't ban handshakes outright. They suggested other options: a fist bump. A smile. A bow. A wave.

This spring, Sklansky and his colleagues published the findings of a survey on their handshake-free zone experiment in the *American Journal of Infection Control*. They found that establishing such zones is possible, can reduce the frequency of handshakes and that most health care workers supported the idea. They didn't measure whether avoiding handshakes reduced the rate of infections, but Sklansky said he hopes to answer that question in a future study.



LARRY SEIL/GATEHOUSE MEDIA

HOSPITAL INFECTIONS: What patients and loved ones can do

Every day, about one in 25 hospital patients contracts a health care-associated infection. You can reduce yours or a loved one's risk by doing the following:

- Ask your doctor how they prevent surgical site infections and how you can prep for surgery to reduce your infection risk.

- After surgery, know the symptoms of infection. MRSA and other infections appear as redness, pain, or drainage at the surgical site. Often these symptoms come with a fever. Tell your health care professional immediately if you have any of these symptoms.

- *C. difficile* is one of the more common and deadly health care acquired infections. Tell your doctor if you have 3 or more diarrhea episodes in 24 hours, especially if you have been taking antibiotics.

- Other commonly acquired infections are preventable through immunizations. Get vaccinated against flu and other illnesses to avoid complications.

- Practice proper hand-washing: Be sure everyone, including visitors, cleans their hands before touching you or the patient.

Source: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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