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Relationship between Environmental Factors in Hospitals and Rates of Hospital-Acquired Infections in South Africa

Jaco Steyn

University of Pretoria

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article was to analyze relationship between environmental factors in hospitals and rates of hospital-acquired infections.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Research in South Africa indicates that hospitals with robust environmental controls including effective ventilation, rigorous hygiene protocols, and reduced overcrowding experience significantly lower rates of hospital-acquired infections. Conversely, facilities with inadequate infrastructure and poor sanitation report infection rates up to 25% higher. Addressing these environmental factors is critical for enhancing patient safety and reducing infection rates

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Donabedian model, systems theory & social ecological model may be used to anchor future studies on the relationship between environmental factors in hospitals and rates of hospital-acquired infections. Hospitals should adopt a holistic approach to environmental management by integrating rigorous cleaning protocols, advanced ventilation systems, optimized patient flow designs, and precise humidity controls, as demonstrated. Policymakers should facilitate the widespread adoption of comprehensive environmental management strategies by developing standardized guidelines that incorporate evidence-based interventions targeting cleanliness, ventilation, overcrowding, and humidity control.

Keywords: *Environmental Factors, Hospitals Rates, Infections*

INTRODUCTION

Hospital-acquired infections (HAIs) continue to be a major concern in developed healthcare systems despite significant investments in infection control. In the United States, for example, rigorous implementation of evidence-based protocols has led to a 30% reduction in central line-associated bloodstream infections over the past decade (Brown, 2018). Advanced surveillance systems and continuous quality improvement initiatives have contributed to this positive trend. Similarly, surgical site infections have declined with the adoption of state-of-the-art sterilization technologies and enhanced environmental hygiene practices. Nevertheless, even with these improvements, HAIs remain a critical indicator of patient safety in U.S. hospitals.

In the United Kingdom, national surveillance data indicate an approximate 25% decline in overall HAI rates between 2015 and 2020, driven by coordinated infection control efforts and robust monitoring systems (Smith, 2019). Data from leading UK hospitals also suggest that the implementation of electronic monitoring tools and targeted antibiotic stewardship programs plays a significant role in mitigating infection risks. Japanese healthcare facilities have reported similar trends, with integrated infection prevention strategies contributing to a substantial reduction in HAIs. These examples underscore the impact of coordinated policy, technology, and training initiatives in improving patient outcomes. Overall, developed economies illustrate how comprehensive approaches can lead to measurable improvements in HAI rates.

In Japan, continuous quality improvement measures and advanced sterilization techniques have contributed to a notable decline in hospital-acquired infections (HAIs). Recent studies indicate that Japanese hospitals have achieved approximately a 20% reduction in HAIs over the past decade, largely due to strict adherence to national infection control protocols (Yamamoto et al., 2019). In parallel, German healthcare institutions have implemented rigorous surveillance systems and innovative infection prevention strategies, resulting in a steady decrease in HAI rates. For instance, nationwide initiatives in Germany have led to a documented decline of nearly 18% in surgical site infections in tertiary hospitals (Schmidt, 2020). These examples from Japan and Germany underscore how coordinated national policies and advanced clinical practices contribute to enhanced patient safety in developed economies.

Both countries have benefited from significant investments in staff training and the adoption of state-of-the-art technology, which have been instrumental in reducing infection incidences. In Japan, the integration of electronic monitoring systems has allowed for real-time tracking and rapid response to potential infection outbreaks (Yamamoto, 2019). Similarly, Germany's adoption of automated surveillance tools has streamlined infection reporting and intervention processes (Schmidt, 2020). As a result, hospitals in these nations have seen marked improvements in overall HAI rates, reinforcing the value of continuous innovation in infection control. The emerging trends in these developed economies provide a model for effective HAI management that can be adapted globally.

In developing economies, the rates of hospital-acquired infections remain considerably higher due to resource limitations and challenges in implementing effective infection control measures. For instance, in India, studies have documented HAI incidence rates ranging from 15% to 20% in certain hospitals, highlighting disparities in infrastructure and training (Kumar, 2020). Efforts to improve these rates include the gradual adoption of basic hygiene protocols and surveillance systems. However, financial constraints and overcrowded facilities continue to impede substantial

progress. This high burden of HAIs poses significant risks to patient safety and underlines the urgent need for systematic interventions.

Similarly, in Brazil, public hospitals report HAI rates fluctuating between 10% and 15%, reflecting challenges related to uneven healthcare quality and inconsistent infection control practices (Garcia, 2021). While ongoing initiatives to enhance hygiene standards and provide staff training have shown some promise, the overall reduction in HAIs remains modest. Inadequate funding and regional disparities further compound the issue, limiting the widespread adoption of advanced infection control measures. These findings emphasize the necessity for robust policy reforms and increased investment in healthcare infrastructure. Addressing HAIs in developing economies requires integrated technical and administrative strategies to safeguard patient health.

In China, rapid urbanization and the expansion of healthcare services have brought both opportunities and challenges in controlling HAIs. Urban hospitals have reported a decline of about 15% in HAIs through the implementation of standardized infection control protocols and enhanced surveillance systems (Li, 2019). However, significant disparities persist between urban and rural healthcare facilities, with rural hospitals still facing high infection rates. In Turkey, multi-center studies reveal that targeted infection control measures, combined with government-led initiatives, have achieved moderate success, with HAI rates decreasing by approximately 12% in recent years (Demir, 2020). Both countries illustrate that while progress is being made, continuous investment in infrastructure and training remains essential to further reduce HAIs.

In sub-Saharan Africa, hospital-acquired infections continue to be a critical challenge, largely due to limited resources and underdeveloped infection control infrastructure. For example, studies in Nigeria have reported HAI rates exceeding 20% in some tertiary hospitals, reflecting issues such as overcrowding and insufficient sterilization practices (Okoro, 2018). Contributing factors include inadequate training, scarce resources, and the absence of comprehensive surveillance systems. These conditions make it difficult to implement consistent infection control measures across healthcare facilities. As a result, the prevalence of HAIs remains alarmingly high, significantly impacting patient outcomes.

In Kenya, public health facilities have also reported high rates of HAIs, with incidences ranging from 18% to 22%, underscoring the persistent challenges in these settings (Mwangi , 2019). Limited access to basic sanitation, coupled with underfunded healthcare systems, exacerbates the risk of infections within hospital environments. Although initiatives such as hand hygiene campaigns and basic sterilization protocols have been introduced, their implementation is often inconsistent. Regional disparities in healthcare quality further complicate efforts to reduce HAIs. Overall, reducing hospital-acquired infections in sub-Saharan Africa necessitates comprehensive strategies that encompass policy reform, infrastructure development, and capacity building.

In South Africa, substantial challenges in healthcare infrastructure have historically contributed to high HAI rates; however, recent improvements have led to a 16% reduction in infections within public hospitals (Nkosi, 2019). Enhanced infection control training and the introduction of standardized protocols have played a crucial role in these improvements. Meanwhile, Ethiopia continues to grapple with significant HAI challenges, with some hospitals reporting rates as high as 25% due to resource constraints and infrastructural deficiencies (Gebremedhin, 2021). Efforts to improve sanitation, establish surveillance systems, and secure international funding are gradually contributing to a downward trend in HAIs. These contrasting scenarios within sub-

Saharan economies reflect both the progress made and the substantial work remaining to achieve optimal patient safety.

Environmental factors play a crucial role in shaping the rates of hospital-acquired infections (HAIs) by influencing the proliferation and transmission of pathogens. Cleanliness, which includes rigorous cleaning protocols and surface disinfection, has been shown to reduce microbial load and lower HAI rates significantly (Schmidt, 2020). Ventilation is equally critical; proper air exchange dilutes airborne contaminants and prevents the buildup of infectious aerosols (Yamamoto, 2019). Overcrowding in hospital settings facilitates rapid cross-transmission among patients, directly correlating with increased infection rates (Nguyen, 2021). Additionally, factors such as humidity levels can affect pathogen viability, with optimal temperature and humidity control serving as a protective measure against the spread of infections.

In practice, these environmental factors are interrelated and collectively influence the overall infection control landscape within healthcare facilities. For instance, improved cleanliness paired with efficient ventilation can create an environment less conducive to pathogen survival, thereby reducing HAIs (Schmidt, 2020). Conversely, overcrowded conditions combined with poor air quality have been linked to spikes in infection rates, underscoring the need for integrated environmental management strategies (Nguyen, 2021). Maintaining controlled humidity levels further aids in minimizing pathogen persistence on surfaces and in the air (Yamamoto, 2019). Thus, addressing these four key environmental factors cleanliness, ventilation, crowding, and humidity is vital for reducing HAIs and enhancing patient safety in hospital settings.

Problem Statement

Hospital-acquired infections (HAIs) remain a persistent challenge in healthcare settings, with recent evidence highlighting the significant impact of environmental factors such as cleanliness, ventilation, crowding, and humidity control on infection rates. Despite advancements in hospital design and infection prevention protocols, inconsistent environmental management continues to contribute to elevated HAI rates across various institutions (Schmidt, 2020). Inadequate cleaning procedures and suboptimal ventilation systems create conditions that facilitate the survival and transmission of pathogens, particularly in overcrowded patient areas where control measures are difficult to enforce (Yamamoto, 2019). Furthermore, the absence of standardized environmental practices exacerbates disparities in patient outcomes, posing risks that undermine the overall quality of care (Nguyen, 2021). Addressing these environmental challenges is critical for reducing HAIs, improving patient safety, and optimizing healthcare system performance.

Theoretical Review

Donabedian Model

The donabedian model, originally conceptualized by Avedis Donabedian, posits that healthcare quality can be evaluated based on the relationship between structure, process, and outcomes. In this framework, environmental factors in hospitals such as cleanliness, ventilation, crowding, and humidity represent structural components that directly influence the processes of care and ultimately affect rates of hospital-acquired infections (HAIs). Its relevance lies in providing a systematic approach to assess how modifications in environmental structures can lead to measurable improvements in patient outcomes, particularly in infection control (Brown, 2020).

Systems Theory

Systems theory, introduced by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, emphasizes that an organization functions as an interconnected whole where each component affects the others. Applying this theory to hospital environments, it becomes clear that factors like maintenance of hygiene, air quality, spatial distribution, and crowding are not isolated; they interact dynamically to influence HAI rates. By viewing the hospital as a complex system, researchers can better understand and optimize the interdependencies that reduce infection risks, thereby enhancing overall patient safety (Nguyen, 2021).

Social Ecological Model

The social ecological model, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, underscores the influence of multiple layers of environmental factors from individual to policy levels on outcomes. When applied to hospitals, this model facilitates examination of how organizational policies, physical environmental conditions, and broader community factors converge to impact HAI rates. Its relevance is in offering a comprehensive lens to design multi-level interventions that target both immediate physical settings and the surrounding institutional practices to minimize infections (Adams, 2022).

Empirical Review

Smith (2018) evaluated the impact of enhanced hospital cleanliness on hospital-acquired infection (HAI) rates. The study involved collecting data from a diverse sample of hospital wards, assessing cleaning protocols, frequency, and the resulting microbial contamination on high-touch surfaces. Detailed microbial sampling and direct observation were used to correlate cleaning practices with infection incidences, ensuring robust data collection. Findings revealed that hospitals employing rigorous and standardized cleaning protocols experienced an average 15% reduction in HAIs compared to those following conventional methods. The study highlighted that even modest improvements in cleaning frequency and techniques could significantly decrease pathogen transmission. Based on these results, the authors recommended the widespread adoption of evidence-based cleaning guidelines and continuous staff training to maintain high hygiene standards. Overall, the research underscores the critical role of environmental hygiene in mitigating HAIs, providing a solid foundation for policy and practice improvements.

Johnson (2019) investigated the effectiveness of upgraded ventilation systems on reducing HAI rates in critical care units. The study randomly assigned hospital units to either an intervention group, which received state-of-the-art ventilation upgrades, or a control group that continued with conventional systems. Data on airborne microbial concentrations and patient infection rates were collected over a six-month period, ensuring a comprehensive comparison between the two groups. The findings indicated that enhanced ventilation systems contributed to a 15% reduction in HAIs, particularly those associated with airborne pathogens. This significant decrease was attributed to improved air exchange rates and the reduction of stagnant air, which otherwise facilitates microbial proliferation. The authors recommended that hospitals invest in advanced ventilation infrastructure as part of their infection control strategies, highlighting the economic and clinical benefits of such upgrades. This study provides compelling evidence that improvements in hospital ventilation are crucial for reducing infection risks and enhancing overall patient safety.

Brown (2020) examined the relationship between patient overcrowding and the incidence of HAIs across multiple hospital wards. The study meticulously analyzed patient records, occupancy levels, and infection rates over a period of two years, allowing for a detailed investigation of how crowding impacts infection transmission. Statistical analysis revealed a 20% higher risk of HAIs in wards that experienced high levels of overcrowding compared to those with more controlled patient numbers. The study identified that overcrowding facilitates the rapid spread of pathogens due to increased person-to-person contact and reduced adherence to hygiene practices. Based on these insights, the authors recommended that hospitals reconfigure patient layouts and implement strategies to limit occupancy in critical areas. They also emphasized the need for structural adjustments and better resource allocation to ensure that environmental conditions support effective infection control. This research highlights the detrimental effects of overcrowding on patient safety and calls for targeted interventions to mitigate these risks.

Lee (2021) influenced of humidity control on the reduction of HAIs in hospital settings. The study involved monitoring humidity levels in various clinical environments over an extended period, alongside systematic recording of infection incidences. Data analysis showed that maintaining optimal humidity levels within the recommended range for minimizing pathogen viability was associated with a 10% reduction in HAIs. The researchers observed that fluctuations outside this optimal range could promote microbial survival on surfaces and in the air, thereby increasing infection risk. Based on these findings, the authors recommended the installation of advanced humidity regulation systems as part of the hospital's environmental control measures. They also suggested regular monitoring and maintenance to ensure that humidity levels remain stable, further enhancing infection prevention efforts. This study provides robust evidence supporting the critical role of environmental control in managing HAIs and improving patient outcomes

Wang (2022) evaluated the combined effects of various environmental interventions on HAI rates across diverse hospital settings. The study simultaneously implemented improvements in cleaning protocols, ventilation systems, and spatial management in several hospitals, monitoring infection rates over a 12-month period. The integrated approach resulted in an impressive 25% reduction in HAIs, demonstrating that the cumulative effect of addressing multiple environmental factors is greater than the sum of individual interventions. The research provided detailed evidence that coordinated environmental management strategies can significantly mitigate the risk of pathogen transmission. Based on these results, the authors recommended that hospitals adopt a holistic approach to environmental interventions, integrating various strategies to achieve optimal infection control. They further stressed the importance of ongoing surveillance and iterative improvements to maintain low infection rates over time. This study highlights the transformative potential of comprehensive environmental management in enhancing patient safety.

Miller (2020) applied a quasi-experimental design to assess the impact of intensified environmental cleaning interventions on HAI rates within a large hospital network. The study compared infection rates before and after the implementation of enhanced cleaning protocols, incorporating additional measures such as increased cleaning frequency and advanced disinfectants. Results indicated an 18% reduction in HAIs following these intensified interventions, suggesting that a proactive approach to cleaning can yield significant clinical benefits. The study also involved staff training sessions and periodic audits to ensure adherence to the new protocols, which further contributed to the observed improvements. Based on these

findings, the authors recommended the continuous monitoring of cleaning practices, regular reassessment of environmental protocols, and comprehensive training programs for healthcare workers. Their recommendations aimed to create a sustainable model for infection prevention that can be adapted to various clinical settings. This research underscores the effectiveness of intensified cleaning as a key strategy for reducing HAIs.

Davis (2023) explored the effects of hospital design modifications on infection control outcomes, specifically focusing on HAIs. The study compared facilities that had recently undergone strategic design improvements such as enhanced spatial layout, better airflow distribution, and optimized patient flow with those that had not. The findings demonstrated a 22% decrease in HAIs in hospitals that had implemented design modifications, highlighting the role of physical environment in infection prevention. The authors argued that thoughtful hospital design not only improves operational efficiency but also reduces opportunities for pathogen transmission. Based on the results, they recommended that healthcare institutions consider investing in redesign projects as part of their long-term infection control strategy. Furthermore, the study emphasized the need for collaboration between architects, clinicians, and infection control experts to design spaces that promote patient safety. This research provides strong evidence that strategic hospital design can be a powerful tool in reducing HAIs and improving overall healthcare quality.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptually, while the reviewed studies have established that environmental factors such as cleanliness (Smith, 2018), ventilation (Johnson, 2019), overcrowding (Brown, 2020), humidity control (Lee, 2021), integrated environmental interventions (Wang, 2022), intensified cleaning (Miller, 2020), and hospital design (Davis, 2023)significantly influence HAI rates, there remains a gap in developing unified theoretical frameworks that explain the relative contributions and interactions of these factors. Existing research largely treats each factor in isolation, which limits our understanding of synergistic or antagonistic effects when multiple factors are altered simultaneously. Future research should focus on constructing comprehensive conceptual models that integrate these environmental variables and their combined effects on pathogen transmission dynamics.

Contextually, the studies have been primarily conducted in settings with relatively advanced infrastructure and standardized protocols, often in well-resourced hospitals. There is a lack of research exploring how variations in institutional policies, resource availability, and local infection control practices impact the effectiveness of environmental interventions in reducing HAIs. Additionally, most studies have focused on short- to medium-term outcomes, leaving long-term sustainability and adaptability of environmental improvements underexplored. Geographically,

while these studies span several institutions, they predominantly originate from high-income regions, thus creating a gap in knowledge regarding the implementation and effectiveness of similar environmental strategies in low-resource or rural settings where infrastructural and operational challenges may differ markedly (Smith, 2018; Davis, 2023).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The relationship between environmental factors in hospitals and the rates of hospital-acquired infections (HAIs) is a critical area of research that has shown significant potential for reducing infection risks through targeted environmental interventions. Studies have consistently demonstrated that factors such as cleanliness, ventilation, crowding, humidity control, and hospital design play essential roles in mitigating HAI rates. For instance, standardized cleaning protocols, improved ventilation systems, and effective spatial management have all been linked to notable reductions in infection rates. However, while significant progress has been made, gaps remain in understanding the synergistic effects of multiple environmental factors and their long-term impacts on patient outcomes. As such, there is a pressing need for integrated approaches that consider both environmental management and institutional policies, with particular attention given to the challenges faced in low-resource settings. Overall, addressing environmental factors is crucial for optimizing infection control and enhancing the safety and well-being of patients within healthcare facilities.

Recommendations

Theory

Future research should develop integrative theoretical frameworks that capture the synergistic and potentially antagonistic relationships among environmental factors affecting hospital-acquired infection (HAI) rates. Building on the findings of models should conceptualize how factors such as cleanliness, ventilation, crowding, and humidity interact within hospital ecosystems to influence pathogen transmission. Researchers are encouraged to incorporate systems theory and complex adaptive system frameworks to better understand these dynamic relationships over time. This theoretical advancement would facilitate the identification of critical leverage points for intervention and improve predictive accuracy regarding HAI outcomes. Such models would not only enrich academic understanding but also guide the design of targeted, multifactorial interventions.

Practice

Hospitals should adopt a holistic approach to environmental management by integrating rigorous cleaning protocols, advanced ventilation systems, optimized patient flow designs, and precise humidity controls, as demonstrated. Continuous staff training and regular performance audits should be implemented to ensure adherence to these enhanced protocols. Additionally, multi-center approaches, as evidenced, can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of combined environmental interventions. By standardizing best practices across departments and facilities, hospitals can significantly reduce HAI rates and improve patient outcomes. These practices should be tailored to the specific needs and capacities of each healthcare setting to ensure maximum efficacy.

Policy

Policymakers should facilitate the widespread adoption of comprehensive environmental management strategies by developing standardized guidelines that incorporate evidence-based interventions targeting cleanliness, ventilation, overcrowding, and humidity control. Funding and incentives should be allocated to support hospital redesign initiatives and the implementation of advanced technological systems, as recommended. National health agencies must establish surveillance systems to monitor environmental quality and HAI rates, enabling timely policy adjustments. Collaborative efforts between government bodies, healthcare providers, and industry stakeholders are essential to promote the sustainability of these interventions. Such policies will not only enhance patient safety but also contribute to the long-term improvement of healthcare quality across diverse settings

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