

## A communication problem: pointing a finger at mobile phones

The ability of mobile phones of healthcare workers to serve as a reservoir of bacteria known to cause nosocomial infection was reported recently by Khivsara *et al.*<sup>1</sup>. They reported high levels (40%) of contamination in these phones by *Staphylococcus aureus* and its methicillin-resistant (sic) relative (MRSA) at a hospital in Mangalore.

This compares with our previously published study<sup>2</sup> of pathogenic bacteria on mobile phones of a large number of healthcare workers in the UK. We had reported that 14.3% of the phones were contaminated with bacteria known to cause Healthcare Associated Infection (HAI). However, only eight phones (7.6%) in our study showed the presence of *S. aureus* and two (1.9%) exhibited meti-cillin resistance.

Khivsara *et al.* are correct in identifying the increased utilization of mobile phone technology in the healthcare environment, and its acceptance by healthcare personnel<sup>3</sup>.

Accordingly, this study should serve as an important reminder to those who advocate relaxation of regulations with regard to utilization of mobile phones in healthcare in India<sup>4</sup>.

More concerning, however, is the revelation with regard to the high levels of contamination on the hands of healthcare workers (40%). Surely, the best measure for avoidance of HAI is effective training and implementation of strict hand-hygiene measures, thus avoiding mobile phone contamination in the first place. This important message is unfortunately lost in the conclusions of the study, which seems to commend the healthcare professionals involved on their 'stringent' hand-hygiene measures and primarily calls for further studies to 'substantiate the role of mobile phones in the transmission of infection to critically ill patients'<sup>1</sup>.

Whilst surveillance of objects in the clinical setting is important, one is left with the impression that hand hygiene has been

overlooked and is under-emphasized. Is the finger (contaminated or otherwise) being pointed in the right direction?

1. Khivsara, A., Sushma, T. V. and Dasha-shree, B., *Curr. Sci.*, 2006, **90**, 910–912.
2. Brady, R. R. *et al.*, *J. Hosp. Infect.*, 2006, **62**, 123–125.
3. Soto, R. G. *et al.*, *Anesth. Analg. (Cleveland)*, 2006, **102**, 533–534.
4. Bhattacharya, K., *Indian J. Surg.*, 2005, **67**, 53–54.

RICHARD BRADY

*Surgical Clinical Research Fellow,  
Western General Hospital,  
School of Molecular and Clinical  
Medicine,  
MRC Human Genetics Unit,  
Edinburgh EH4 2XU,  
United Kingdom  
e-mail: richardbrady@btinternet.com*

## Plight of higher education, science and technology

In response to several contributions published in *Current Science* since the start of this year, I wish to respond as follows:

(1) The University system is currently managed under a highly politicized and bureaucratic environment. To have genuine autonomy, it is high time we think about the way Vice-Chancellors/Directors are appointed. The Chancellors/Directors are also under cloud. We need to develop a National Panel/Roster for such appointees, from amongst distinguished professors, scientists, social scientists and philosophers. The last tribe is not even mentioned these days. Professional non-governmental organizations also need to become active. The honour associated with positions of leadership badly needs to be restored, to prevent direct or indirect approaches made to secure such positions. The JNU pattern of Chancellorship is a good example.

(2) Improved salary grades appear to have resulted only in enhancing personal gratifications rather than the spirit of giving and receiving less to serve the system. Schemes involving incentives, including special grades/chairs must be evolved, based on universal status rather than regional criteria for judging excellence.

(3) Short-term solutions worked out and implemented in an ad hoc manner will not work. For example, huge grants to upgrade research laboratories have resulted in wasteful expenditure on buying sophisticated black-box equipment, without generating healthy in-house development efforts. Only the latter can strengthen industry–university/laboratory linkages to enhance high technology and national wealth indigenously.

(4) Good teachers and scientists are associated with traits of simplicity, humility, innocence and curiosity. Ethical issues arise, as the system encourages those with

opposite traits. It may be wise to award good teamwork instead of individual performance, which is more subjective. Development work will get a boost this way, as holistic approaches provide the way for innovation and creativity.

(5) Retirement of versatile and talented faculty is resulting in imbalance of desired peership. Appropriate schemes to involve retired faculty without regular salary need to be evolved. US universities have long abolished retirement, except on health parameters that affect professional performance adversely.

NARENDRA NATH

*259, Sector 7,  
Urban Estate,  
Kurukshetra 136 118, India  
e-mail: drn\_nath@yahoo.com*