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Doctors' dirty hands a factor in high MRSA

'Secret' study uncovers low hygiene amongst Malta's medics

MATTHEW VELLA

A study by St Luke's Hospital's infection control unit has found that hand hygiene among doctors is low and could be a factor in the high incidence of Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) at the hospital.

Of a total of 898 direct observations by a group of medical students, whose precise assignment was unknown to doctors under surveillance, only 22.7 per cent of doctors were observed washing their hands before contact with patients, and only 33.5 per cent after contact.

Covering 192 doctors – 48 of St Luke's four-person firms (out of a total of 75) – the study, the first of its kind, was carried out between November 2005 and February 2006. Although consultants of every firm were informed of the study, the actual nature was not disclosed.

The study, published in the Malta Medical Journal, found abysmal levels of handwashing among consultants in obstetrics and gynaecology – only 3.7% in 27 observations complied before and after patient contact. Worse still were senior registrars from the same department, with 0% compliance from eight observa-

tions.

Overall, before patient contact compliance ranged from a low 9.9% in obstetrics, to 45.6 per cent in surgical specialties. After patient contact compliance for these same specialties showed rates of 11.3% and 59.5% respectively.

Consultants from general surgery and surgical specialties had the highest rates of compliance, ranging from 35.2% before patient contact, to 63.6% after patient contact.

Average compliance by grade ranged from 16.7% in house officers to 26.6% in senior registrars before contact; and from 29.9%

in consultants to 45.5% in registrars after patients contact.

The researchers, Sarah Chetcuti, Maxine Montefort, Elizabeth Scicluna and Michael Borg, said one of the most self-reported reasons for low levels of handwashing was the lack of facilities such as wash-hand basins, soap and water, and alcohol.

"Our results concur with this. A large increase in compliance was



observed when facilities were available in the immediate working ▶ page 7

CARAVAGGIO CONTROVERSY - The Beheading of the Heritage Malta exhibition - page 7

Gonzi's budget 'lie' turns out to be Sunday Times misquote

IT was one of those little words that make all the difference; in this case it made the prime minister look like a barefaced liar.

According to The Sunday Times' interview with Lawrence Gonzi, he received emails from the Opposition lauding his budget. "The reaction has been good – I've even had e-mails from Opposition members saying it was a good Budget and that it had addressed the country's major needs," he was quoted as saying.

The quote infuriated the Opposition's bench, with the Labour HQ mobilising all 30 MPs to sign a declaration yesterday, denying they ever sent any emails congratulating Gonzi on his budget.

The declaration was accompanied by a press release slamming the prime minister for his "barefaced lie".

"Although it's been four years since he became prime minister promising to bring a new way of doing politics, on the eve of the election Lawrence Gonzi is behaving just like his predecessor, by lying for electoral convenience," Labour said. One Labour MP whose signature could not be recognised went as far as adding, "I don't even know his email" on the same page.

In response, the Office of the Prime Minister went back to the original recording of the interview. As it turned out, Gonzi had never referred to "Opposition members" at all.

A spokesman for Gonzi said

The Sunday Times had got it wrong and was expecting a correction to be published today. The exact quote reads: "I've received emails sent directly to me, even by people coming from the opposite party, from the Labour party, acknowledging the fact that it was a good budget, that it addressed their major needs."

Still, the spokesman could not name the persons referred to by Gonzi.

Foundation for disabled children faces imminent closure

RAPHAEL VASSALLO

A non-profit, parent-run support organisation for children with disabilities and learning difficulties, and whose requests for financial assistance have repeatedly been turned down by government for over six years, now faces imminent closure due to lack of funds.

The Equal Partnership Foundation (EPF) currently provides support services to close to 200 families with members who have special needs, mainly persons with physical and intellectual impairments. In the last three years the number of parents resorting to its services has increased exponentially, but according to executive manager Anabel Mifsud, the Foundation

will nonetheless have to cease providing its services within the next few months.

"In order to deliver the services the Foundation requires a lot of funding," Mifsud resignedly told MaltaToday. "The support the Foundation gives relies on the fees the families pay, the sponsorships and donations we receive, the fund-raising we manage ▶ page 7

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