

Infection Control Nursing

These nurses prevent patients from contracting avoidable infections.

I've been a nurse for eight years, with a background in bedside nursing in the ED. Most of my career, however, has been spent in infection prevention and control. I was naive when I first went into infection prevention, lacking a true understanding of how broad the specialty is. Nursing school only teaches the fundamentals of infection prevention, providing very little on epidemiology. I was working as a charge nurse in the ED when the opportunity arose to become involved in a process improvement project to reduce Foley catheter insertions in our department. I remember thinking, how difficult could it be?

As I dove deeper into the project, I began to learn more about the adverse effects that a catheter-associated urinary tract infection could have on a patient's clinical outcome. After spending more time with the infection preventionist assisting on the project, I began to ask more questions about the field. The ED is a high turnover, high adrenaline department, and depending on how a patient presents, you don't always have control of their outcome in this setting. What I found intriguing about infection control is that if you institute the basic foundational principles of infection prevention at the initiation of care, you can have a real and positive impact on a patient's outcome.

What we do. Within the field of infection prevention and control, our primary role is to take an evidence-based approach to preventing both patients and health care workers from being harmed by avoidable infections. Our work is relevant to every interaction and encounter in health care. The responsibility of oversight within this field has expanded so broadly that infection control professionals are responsible for ensuring that policies and processes are in place in everything from air quality to direct patient care. The infection prevention and control department collaborates with all clinical and ancillary departments in a facility to achieve successful solutions and initiate high-functioning programs to reduce the transmission of infections.

Challenges. Challenges within infection prevention and control existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, but as with many other health care fields, this one has been impacted even more since. Though the field is expanding rapidly, the availability of infection control professionals is lacking. Insufficient resources, inadequate

hospital infrastructure, a lack of education, burn-out, and staff shortages are some of the top challenges the field faces. The need for qualified staff is greater now than ever, with emerging infectious organisms and the rise of antimicrobial resistance, as well as postpandemic challenges, also prevalent. Many infection prevention and control departments are not equipped with the training, education, or staff they need to face these continued and upcoming challenges.

Career goals. Infection preventionists often strive to obtain a Certification in Infection Prevention and Control (CIC), which demonstrates competency in the practice of infection

prevention and control and health care epidemiology. A certified infection preventionist is better prepared to lead and use quantitative and qualitative research to drive the implementation of infection control practices. Other available certifications include Long-Term Care Certification in Infection Prevention (LTC-CIP) and Associate-Infection Prevention and Control (a-IPC). For more information, go to www.cbic.org.

Connecting with colleagues. The Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC; <https://apic.org>) is the professional association for infection preventionists and has more than 15,000 members. The association consists of nurses, physicians, public health professionals, epidemiologists, microbiologists, and medical technologists. There are currently 109 chapters within the association, three of which are international. The local chapters are great resources for connecting with colleagues to provide ongoing support and communicate on issues in your area.

For those interested in this specialty, I would encourage you to reach out to your local APIC chapter and learn more about the infection control professionals in your area with similar nursing backgrounds. Infection preventionists are like the detectives of health care. Being able to solve medical mysteries and protect individuals and the community from impending infections and threats to their health makes this one of the most exciting and rewarding specialties in nursing. ▼

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