

Global Handwashing Day more relevant this year



Oct. 22, 2020

By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Oct. 15 was Global Handwashing Day and its message of "Hand Hygiene for All" was especially relevant this year with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This message, spearheaded by the Global Handwashing Partnership, to keep one's hands clean and relatively free of germs is just good advice to prevent sickness and disease, but this year, that message could mean the difference between life and death for some people particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus.

Forty per cent of the world's population, some three billion people, do not have access to a place to wash their hands with soap and water in their homes. Three quarters of those without that access to soap and water live in the poorest nations and are among the most vulnerable, putting roughly one billion people at immediate risk of COVID-19 because they cannot clean their hands properly.

The Global Handwashing Partnership, or GHP, formerly named the Global Public-Private Partnership for Handwashing, was formed back in 2001. In 2017, it changed its name to the GHP, and it is a coalition of international private sector entities, academic institutions, government agencies, non-government agencies and community organizations working to promote handwashing with soap and the public health advantages doing so provides. They are pushing for universal access to hand hygiene to curb and eventually defeat COVID-19. This goal has been emphasized in the World Health Organization's April 2020 publication "Interim Recommendations on Obligatory Hand Hygiene Against Transmission of COVID-19." It also aligns with the Hand Hygiene for All global initiative led by UNICEF and the WHO.

The Centre for Disease Control in the U.S. or CDC, recommends following five steps to washing your hands properly. They advocate wetting your hands with clean running water and applying soap, lathering every part of your hands by rubbing them together with the soap, scrub them for at least 20 seconds or the time it takes you to sing "Happy Birthday" twice, rinse your hands with clean running water, and then drying them with a clean towel or air dryer. Drying your hands well is also essential. According to the Mayo Clinic, wet hands spread germs more easily.

Handwashing with soap and water is easy, effective and affordable. It was first championed back in 1846 by a Hungarian doctor working in Vienna, Ignaz Semmelweis, who is also known as the father of hand hygiene. However, his efforts largely fell on deaf ears. Florence Nightingale, an English nurse during the Crimean War was another advocate of handwashing to prevent sickness and disease. The work of Dr. Joseph Lister on germ theory in 1867 eventually led to doctors sterilizing their surgical equipment and washing their hands regularly by 1875. Over the ensuing century, handwashing fell out of favour to a large degree among the

general public. It has come back to prominence as a good way to defeat germs and infections over the past several decades. The CDC trumpeted hand washing as a way to preclude infection since the 1980's and with that endorsement, other countries have followed suit in the years since. Over the past 20 years, the GHP has been getting the word out even more, to the point where handwashing is universally available. For more information go to globalhandwashingpartnership.org

David Jensen is with the communications branch of the Ontario Ministry of Health, and agrees with the GHP that the simple act of washing your hands has always been necessary to keep people healthy and free from disease.

?Now during the COVID-19 pandemic, it's never been more important to maintain the habit of frequent and thorough hand washing to protect your health and the well-being of people around you as we continue this fight against the virus.?