

1-1-1990

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Recommended Citation

Sarabakhsh, Mort Director (1990) "Developing sanitary Practices In the Lodging Housekeeping Department," *Hospitality Review*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/hospitalityreview/vol8/iss1/6>

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Developing sanitary Practices In the Lodging Housekeeping Department

Abstract

Seventeen out of 19 directors of hotel and motel housekeeping departments in an upper midwest urban area expressed concern about sanitation procedures in their facilities as part of a survey which indicates that some house-keeping procedures and practices need to be improved and modified to - constitute a safe and sanitized approach. The author explains the results and presents practical sanitary guidelines for such departments.

Keywords

Mort Sarabakhsh, Developing Sanitary Practices in the Lodging Housekeeping Department, Cleanliness, Sanitation, Survey, Disinfectants, Manuals, Hand-washing

Developing Sanitary Practices in the Lodging Housekeeping Department

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Seventeen out of 19 directors of hotel and motel housekeeping departments in an upper midwest urban area expressed concern about sanitation procedures in their facilities as part of a survey which indicates that some housekeeping procedures and practices need to be improved and modified to constitute a safe and sanitized approach. The author explains the results and presents practical sanitary guidelines for such departments.

A clean, comfortable, and safe environment for guests, visitors, and employees is the primary responsibility of a hotel's housekeeping department; a good operation in this area may be the best public relations a hotel can have. If a hotel or motel is dirty, those who stay there one night will not return; they will even tell others about the condition and discourage them from stopping there.¹ Both management and guests consider keeping a place clean and in good repair to be absolutely necessary for a hotel to command a fair price and get repeat business. Housekeeping is responsible for setting the scene and maintaining the quality of the scenery.²

Since hotel cleanliness is the responsibility of the housekeeping department, it follows that the contribution made by the housekeeping department of any hotel or motel is an important determinant of the value that guests find in that particular lodging. If the members of the housekeeping staff perform their jobs well, they increase their hotel's chances of success considerably. If they do not, they are likely to drive away guests, endanger their own security and prospects for advancement, and sacrifice the satisfaction to be gained from knowing they play a vital part in rendering a service that is valuable, respected, and necessary in our fast-moving economy.³

America has become a health-conscious society. This trend has been demonstrated by surveys which have been conducted by the American Hotel Motel Association (AHMA) and other chain or independent hotel operators. Guests always rank cleanliness as a major priority in selecting a lodge for accommodation.⁴

Cleanliness is not only taking dust, lint, dirt, stains, and spills off surfaces, but it goes one step further and entails disinfecting. Sanitation and good housekeeping can both be defined as the practice of rendering the establishment free of agents injurious to health. The housekeeping

director should have some knowledge or awareness of microbiology—the study of microscopic life, such as bacteria, viruses, yeast, and molds—in order to develop routine sanitary cleaning procedures, odor control methods, waste disposal, and pest control methods.⁴

Hotel and motel operators have a social and moral obligation to the traveling public, employees, and visitors. They should provide a clean, comfortable, safe environment and especially one free of contagious disease.

There is some concern that hotel housekeeping has ignored sanitation or disinfecting procedures for years. On the other hand, health care facilities such as hospital and clinic housekeeping departments have been aware of disinfecting procedures and have established stringent cleaning and sanitation practices to curtail cross-contamination within their facilities. They use disinfectants that kill microorganisms on animate objects.⁶ If a hotel guest who is a carrier of an infectious disease such as fungus, diarrhea, body, head and pubic lice, or some skin diseases checks out of room and that room is not sanitized or disinfected, hotel guests and employees are considered potential victims to be contaminated with these germs.

Research Seeks Sanitary Practices Guidelines

In order to develop and recommend a practical guideline for enhancing sanitary practices in the lodging housekeeping department, 19 hotels and motels located in the upper midwest urban area of approximately 140,000 people were asked to participate in a research project; 17 agreed to do so, representing 29 percent independent and 11 percent chain hotels and motels and 60 percent franchised operations. Over 41 percent of the hotels had fewer than 100 rooms; 53 percent had 100-200 room inventories and over 6 percent had 300 or more. The director of the housekeeping department in more than 41 percent of the hotels was executive housekeeper; more than 35 percent called it head housekeeper, and the rest, housekeeper. All those listed as director of housekeeping were female. Over 58 percent of the housekeeping managers were involved in hiring decisions, and over 29 percent responded that their general managers make hiring decisions for them. Almost 12 percent of these managers also responded that hotel owners made final decisions regarding staffing their departments.

A letter and a consent form, which described the nature of the project, confidentiality, risks, and benefits, were mailed to all hotel and motel general managers in the community. They were asked if they would agree to participate in this project; if so, the research assistant would conduct an interview with the director of the housekeeping department at their facilities.

The research assistant made an appointment with the housekeeping director of each facility and presented the questionnaires. Housekeeping managers responded to the questionnaire in the presence of the research assistant, so that if there were any questions which needed clarification or explanation, the research assistant could provide the additional information.

Survey Lists Competencies

No survey instrument existed for a study like this one, so one was developed. From the literature review and after consulting with lodging and health care executive housekeepers, a list of 22 competencies needed in housekeeping were compiled. Telephone and site visitations were conducted with several housekeeping directors to ascertain the clarity and content validity of the instrument.

The questions were concerned with classification of lodging, type of affiliation, size, the current title of housekeeping managers, their role in hiring decisions and budgeting, and primary method of training new employees. Other areas included the following: Do they have a manual of procedures or quality assurance programs? Are they concerned with cross-contamination? Do they use any disinfectants for cleaning, or do they wear gloves while cleaning rooms and bathrooms? Do housekeepers use mops, separate rags, and bowl swabs for cleaning bathrooms? Do they wash their hands during break time? There was also interest in identifying if these properties had laundry operations, whether they used any sanitizing cleaning detergents, and if laundry attendants wore gloves while handling soiled linens.

Almost Half Lack Written Manuals

The results of this study showed that over 41 percent of hotels did not have a cleaning procedure manual for each item or area. Written manuals should be available for employees as a reference and used as part of a training component. Without this documentation, there will be no annual evaluation to improve and modify cleaning procedures and enhance sanitary procedures.

More than 23 percent of respondents replied that they were not concerned with cross-contamination. Most of the housekeeping directors asked the research assistant to define the "cross-contamination" concept, indicating that it is a new or alien concept for them. Transmission or spread of a contagious disease can occur at any time in a hotel or motel. One of the major inhibitors of spread of an infectious disease in hotels is the housekeeping staff's awareness of its existence. Management's awareness and knowledge can result in proper sanitary cleaning steps. Lack of concern about cross-contamination by housekeeping managers should concern the traveling public.

All of the housekeeping managers indicated that their employees had personal equipment and containers, but more than 52 percent did not wear gloves when cleaning bathrooms. This approach needs to be changed because hands are considered to be major carriers of infectious disease. If housekeepers do not wear gloves while cleaning, they not only put their own health and safety at risk, but that of guests as well. Their contaminated hands can spread viruses and bacteria all over the property.

More than 17 percent of respondents said their housekeepers do not use bowl swabs (johnny mops) for cleaning toilet bowls nor fresh rags or sponges for cleaning each room. Using bowl swabs is considered to be one of the safe cleaning methods to clean a bowl. It is unsanitary

not to use fresh rags and sponges for cleaning a new room. If only one rag or sponge is used for cleaning all the rooms, the contaminated rag or sponge can easily spread or transmit infectious diseases to all areas of the hotel.

All of the directors of housekeeping departments indicated that they use some type of disinfectant as a cleaning product. This is a positive and encouraging sign. Only 23 percent of the executive housekeepers were in charge of buying equipment, tools, and cleaning products, while more than 58 percent of these purchases were decided by general managers. Six percent of the respondents indicated that both general managers and executive housekeepers make purchasing decisions. In the remaining 13 percent, decisions were made by the purchasing agent. It is advisable and practical that the director of the housekeeping department be considered as the major source to decide what kind of equipment, tools, and cleaning products should be purchased for the hotel. The housekeeping department is the consumer of cleaning equipment, tools, and products. Its contribution in the selection of cleaning items should not be overlooked.

More than 17 percent of the directors of housekeeping did not know if staff members washed their hands on break or at the end of the shift. Washing hands must be reinforced as a mandatory procedure for all employees in the housekeeping department.

All of the hotel participants did have laundry operations and used some type of sanitizing cleaning detergent for the laundry, but more than 82 percent of linen attendants who handled soiled linen did not wear gloves. Lint, dirt, or dust in the linen is considered to be a carrier of infectious disease.

Laundry attendants, while handling bed and bathroom linens, should wear gloves to protect themselves and others from infectious disease.

Departments Do Not Attract Males

Finally, the fact that all of the directors were female suggests that lodging housekeeping departments still carry an image problem and do not attract male managers. A national survey of housekeeping managers conducted in 1985 within the health and lodging establishments with the cooperation of the National Executive Housekeeper's Association revealed that health care housekeeping department managers are paid better and have more education than managers of lodging housekeeping departments.⁷ The result was impressive, because more than 45 percent of health care housekeeping managers were male. Lodging establishments should seriously and vigorously plan strategies to enhance the housekeeping department's image. Hotel operators must bring changes within this department to attract more qualified managers—whether male or female.

Several practical suggestions are offered to the hospitality industry, especially housekeeping managers, for developing sound and practical sanitary practices within this department.

First, the lodging industry should respect and recognize housekeep-

ing managers as part of the true management team. They do not deserve to be overlooked. They should have the authority for final decisions regarding hiring, promotions, and demotions of staff, and the purchasing of equipment, tools, and cleaning products.

Sanitary Procedures Must Be Detailed

Housekeeping managers should provide a written and detailed procedures manual that indicates the sanitary procedures to be followed in cleaning guest rooms and public areas. This manual should clarify job descriptions of each housekeeping staff member, avoid evasive terminology, and be accessible to all employees. Hotel housekeeping managers can improve their knowledge about cross-contamination by participating in local public health programs. Hospitals must have an infection control nurse in their establishment, according to the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals (JCAH). Infection control nurses are trained and well-educated employees in curtailing the spread of contagious diseases within medical facilities. Housekeeping managers can ask such an individual from a nearby hospital to attend employee meetings or conduct a special workshop on this subject for employees.

This type of developmental training could protect guests, visitors, and staff from microorganisms that generate disease. Lodging managers can also correspond with professional organizations such as the American Hotel Motel Association (AHMA) or the American Hospital Association (AHA) to receive advice on executing sanitary practices within lodging establishments.

Directors of housekeeping departments should enforce mandatory rules for employees to wear gloves while cleaning guest rooms or handling soiled linen in the laundry room. Hand washing should be exercised by all staff during break time or at the end of their shifts. The lodging industry should contrive to use disinfectants as part of their cleaning products or sanitizing detergents for laundering soiled linen for the safety and well-being of the traveling public.

Fresh rags or sponges should be applied in each room to minimize the spread of infection, and housekeepers should use bowl swabs (johnny mops) for cleaning toilets. There must not be any direct hand contact while cleaning toilet bowls.

The lodging industry needs to enhance its housekeeping image from a "dustbusting" view to a professional and essential department. This movement requires several alternatives:

- adopting more appealing and professional names and job titles for housekeeping departments
- improving pay scales and fringe benefits for managers, supervisors, and line employees
- reducing working hours to manageable levels—employee turnover is associated with long hours
- recognizing the importance of housekeeping departments and in-

volving the director of the department in developing and achieving overall objectives in his or her establishment

- treating executive housekeepers as “real” managers by valuing their suggestions and providing them with strong support in carrying out their responsibilities

Future research could go beyond the scope of this study in several ways. For example, a group of hotel executive housekeepers could be provided with some workshops that deal with sanitation and manual development. This group could then be compared with similar managers who did not attend any workshop to determine whether such educational workshops help managers to devise effective sanitation practices within their facilities. This study was limited only to one community and should be replicated in other parts of the country to investigate whether there are regional and national sanitation problems. The industry is just beginning to understand the fundamental problems and issues examined in this study, but the evidence is there that lodging housekeeping departments need to improve and modify their cleaning procedures to curtail cross-contamination.

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NOTE: The author expresses appreciation to Kristi Ojigho, graduate student assistant, who collaborated in pilot studies and collecting data.