WHO’s “Clean Care is Safer Care” campaign: why hasn’t New Zealand joined?

More than 165 years after the Hungarian physician Dr Ignaz Semmelweis observed that simply washing hands could drastically reduce high rates of maternal death during childbirth, half of practitioners still do not regularly wash their hands before seeing patients.¹ Healthcare-associated infections remain a major global issue for patient safety, with hundreds of millions of patients around the world affected each year. The prevention of healthcare-associated infections was chosen by WHO Patient Safety as the theme of its 1st Global Patient Safety Challenge “Clean Care is Safer Care” launched in October 2005.²

The International Society for Quality in Health Care’s annual conference, ISQua, was held this year in Geneva on 22-24 October 2012, with over a 1000 delegates from 70 countries around the world. Professor Didier Pittet, Director of Infection Control at the University of Geneva Hospitals and External Programme Lead of the WHO’s “Clean Care is Safer Care” campaign, demonstrated on a world map how 129 WHO countries or areas have made formal statements pledging their support to implement actions to reduce health care-associated infection within their countries and to share results and learning internationally.³

It came as a great surprise to see that New Zealand was one of only a handful of countries that have not signed this pledge. Indeed, I was so surprised I wrote to Hand Hygiene New Zealand,⁴ a collaboration between the Auckland District Health Board and the Health Quality & Safety Commission, to confirm and ask why New Zealand had not joined. I was advised that the matter had been raised with the Ministry of Health but that little progress was being made in getting the Minister of Health to sign the WHO pledge.

The Hand Hygiene New Zealand programme is an important measure, and as Sally Roberts and colleagues demonstrated in their May 2012 NZMJ article,⁵ some progress is being made in improving compliance with hand hygiene. However, it is clear further efforts are required. By not signing the WHO pledge and supporting this international initiative to reduce health care-associated infections and improve patient care, the Minister of Health is sending a negative message to healthcare workers and the public of New Zealand. The Minister should be seen to be supporting quality initiatives in healthcare by showing strong leadership from the top.

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3. World Health Organisation. Clean Care is Safer Care: Support from countries or areas worldwide - Pledges to combat health care-associated infections. 
