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INFECTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL IN PEDIATRIC MEDICAL IMAGING: BEST PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

OMAR A. ALAHMARI[1], ABDULAZIZ A ALSHIHRI[2], TAREQ SAAD ALSHEHRI[3], ABDULKARIM HAMEED ALANAZI[4], ABDULAZIZ ABDULLAH AL-DAMEGH[5], MARYAM ALKAHTANI[6], MANAL NASER BIN SUNBIL[7], MEHINAT MOHAMMED ALOBAIDAN[8], ABDULMAJID MOHAMMAD HAMZAH MUBARAK[9], SHATHA AL DAILEJ[10]

[1]SENIOR SPECIALIST, RADIOLOGY AND NUCLEAR MEDICINE, SECURITY FORCES HOSPITAL, RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA, EMAIL: oalahmri@moi.med.sa
[2]ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF RADIOLOGICAL, COLLEGE OF APPLIED [3]MEDICAL SCIENCES, KING KHALID UNIVERSITY, ABHA, SAUDI ARABIA, EMAIL: aaalshehre@kku.edu.sa
[4]SENIOR SPECIALIST, RADIOLOGY DEPARTMENT, THE PRESIDENCY OF STATE SECURITY, RIYADH, SAUDIA ARABIA, EMAIL: tareq-999@hotmail.com
[5]SPECIALIST, RADIOLOGY DEPARTMENT, THE PRESIDENCY OF STATE SECURITY, RIYADH, SAUDIA ARABIA, EMAIL: ak.rad@hotmail.com
[6]PHARMACY TECHNICIAN, MAJMAAH UNIVERSITY, SAUDI ARABIA, EMAIL: azoozk190@hotmial.com
[7]CONSULTANT OBESTETRIC AND GYNECOLOGY, SAUDI ARABIA
[8]SENIOR PHYSIOTHERAPIST, SAUDI ARABIA, EMAIL: manalpt2008@gmail.com
[9]SENIOR PHYSICAL THERAPY, NATIONAL GUARD HEALTH AFFAIR, SAUDI ARABI, EMAIL: obedanm@ngha.med.sa
[10]RADIOLOGY TECHNOLOGY, PRINCE MOHAMMED BINABDULAZIZ HOSPITAL - NATIONAL GUARD, SAUDI ARABIA STAFF NURSE, SAUDI ARABIA, EMAIL: aldailejsh@mngha.med.sa

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Abstract

This comprehensive review examines infection prevention and control (IPC) practices in pediatric medical imaging, addressing the unique challenges and best practices in this specialized healthcare setting. Pediatric patients are particularly vulnerable to healthcareassociated infections due to their developing immune systems, making robust IPC protocols essential in radiology departments serving children. The article synthesizes evidence from 67 studies to identify common sources of infection in pediatric imaging environments, including contaminated equipment, procedural risks, and environmental factors. Best practices for infection prevention are detailed, encompassing hand hygiene, equipment cleaning and disinfection, appropriate use of personal protective equipment, and workflow optimization. The review highlights several documented outbreaks associated with medical imaging procedures, underscoring the importance of stringent infection control measures. Significant challenges in pediatric settings include unique pediatric considerations, knowledge and compliance gaps among staff, resource constraints, and the ongoing threat of emerging infectious diseases as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A systems engineering approach to infection prevention is advocated, recognizing that effective IPC requires attention to human factors and organizational systems beyond individual compliance with protocols. The article concludes with recommendations for implementing comprehensive infection control programs in pediatric imaging departments and identifies promising future directions,

including non-contact technologies and standardized guidelines development. This review provides valuable guidance for healthcare professionals working in pediatric imaging to enhance patient safety through effective infection prevention strategies.

Keywords: infection control, pediatric radiology, healthcare-associated infections, medical imaging, patient safety, COVID-19, infection prevention

INTRODUCTION

Healthcare-associated infections (HAIs) represent a significant challenge in medical settings, including pediatric medical imaging departments. Children are particularly vulnerable to infections due to their developing immune systems, making infection prevention and control (IPC) protocols essential in pediatric radiology. This study examines the current best practices, emerging challenges, and evidencebased strategies for infection prevention and control in pediatric medical imaging environments. Diagnostic imaging plays a crucial role in pediatric healthcare, but the associated equipment, procedures, and environmental factors can pose infection risks if not properly managed. According to Ilyas et al. (2019), radiology departments present unique infection control challenges due to the specialized equipment, high patient turnover, and diverse patient populations they serve. These challenges are amplified in pediatric settings where patients may be immunocompromised and more susceptible to infections.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of robust infection prevention strategies in healthcare settings, including radiology departments (Davenport et al., 2020; Eastgate et al., 2020). As pediatric imaging services continue to evolve with technological advancements, so must the approaches to infection prevention and control to safeguard the health of young patients and healthcare staff.

Epidemiology of Healthcare-Associated Infections in Pediatric Imaging

Healthcare-associated infections in radiology departments, while not as extensively documented as in other clinical areas, represent a significant concern. Picton-Barnes et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of healthcare-associated infectious organisms in medical radiation science departments and identified several pathogens of concern, including methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), Clostridium difficile, and various viral pathogens.

Several documented outbreaks highlight the potential for infection transmission in imaging settings. Shteyer et al. (2019) modeled an outbreak of hepatitis C that occurred during computerized tomography procedures, demonstrating how even microliter volumes of contaminated blood could lead to significant infection spread. Similarly, Moore et al. (2011) reported transmission of hepatitis C virus during myocardial perfusion imaging in an outpatient clinic, while Chitnis et al. (2012) documented an outbreak of bacterial meningitis among patients undergoing myelography.

In the pediatric population specifically, Kim et al. (2013) reported an outbreak of joint infections associated with magnetic resonance arthrograms performed at an outpatient radiology center. These incidents underscore the importance of stringent infection control measures in pediatric imaging departments.

Common Sources of Infection in Pediatric Medical Imaging Equipment-Related Risks

Medical imaging equipment represents a significant potential reservoir for pathogens. Shelly et al. (2011) found MRSA environmental contamination in a radiology department, while Giacometti et al. (2014) documented extensive microbiological contamination of radiologic equipment. In pediatric settings, frequently touched surfaces of imaging equipment, including control panels, patient tables, and positioning devices, may harbor pathogens that can be transmitted between patients.

Studies by Fox and Harvey (2008) investigated infection control for x-ray cassettes, while Boyle and Strudwick (2010) examined potential infection risks associated with lead rubber aprons. Both studies identified these items as potential vectors for cross-contamination if not properly cleaned and disinfected between patients.

Automated contrast media injectors have also been identified as potential infection risks. Buerke et al. (2008, 2010, 2011) conducted a series of investigations into microbial contamination of automatic injectors used in CT imaging and found concerning levels of contamination, particularly in multidose systems. Similarly, Goebel et al. (2019) documented bacterial contamination of automated MRI contrast injectors in clinical routine use.

Procedural Risks

Certain imaging procedures carry inherent infection risks, particularly those involving invasive components. Pañella et al. (2008) documented transmission of hepatitis C virus during computed tomography scanning with contrast, while Balmelli et al. (2020) reported an outbreak of hepatitis C virus infections originating from a breach in safe injection practices before contrast-enhanced computed tomography scanning.

In pediatric settings, procedures such as fluoroscopy-guided interventions, contrast studies involving catheterization, and image-guided biopsies present particular challenges for infection control. The use of contrast media itself can pose risks, as demonstrated by Dominik et al. (1995), who investigated the risk of microbial contamination of iodinated contrast media in multiple-use large-volume bottles.

Environmental Factors

The physical environment of imaging departments can contribute to infection transmission. Duszak et al. (2014) found bacterial contamination on radiologist workstations, while Crofton and Foley (2018) investigated radiographers' mobile phone use as a potential source of nosocomial infections.

In pediatric imaging environments, additional considerations include toys and distraction devices in waiting areas, which may serve as fomites if not properly cleaned between uses. The rapid turnover of patients in busy imaging departments can also compromise thorough cleaning protocols between patients.

Best Practices for Infection Prevention in Pediatric Medical Imaging Hand Hygiene

Hand hygiene remains the cornerstone of infection prevention in all healthcare settings, including pediatric radiology. O'Donoghue et al. (2016) conducted a quasi-experimental study to determine the effects of a multifaceted educational intervention on hand hygiene compliance in a radiography unit, finding that targeted education could significantly improve compliance rates.

In pediatric settings, hand hygiene is particularly important given the close physical contact often required to position and comfort young patients during imaging procedures. The World Health Organization's "Five Moments for Hand Hygiene" framework (WHO, 2009) provides a structured approach that can be adapted for radiology settings:

1. Before touching a patient
2. Before clean/aseptic procedures
3. After body fluid exposure risk
4. After touching a patient
5. After touching patient surroundings

Lotfnejad et al. (2021) emphasize that despite 20 years of advances in hand hygiene practices, consistent compliance remains a challenge across healthcare settings, including radiology departments. **Equipment Cleaning and Disinfection**

Thorough cleaning and disinfection of imaging equipment is essential for preventing crosscontamination between patients. Mizra et al. (2015) provide comprehensive guidance on microbiology for radiologists, including recommendations for minimizing infection transmission in radiology departments through appropriate equipment cleaning protocols.

For pediatric imaging, equipment cleaning procedures should consider the frequency of contact with surfaces, the potential for contamination with bodily fluids, and the compatibility of cleaning agents with sensitive equipment. Manufacturers' guidelines for cleaning should be followed to prevent damage to imaging equipment while ensuring adequate disinfection.

Nandy et al. (2017) evaluated one-way valves used in medical devices for prevention of crosscontamination, while Gretzinger et al. (1996) validated the integrity of one-way check valves for the delivery of contrast solution to multiple patients. These studies highlight the importance of considering all components of imaging systems in infection control planning.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Appropriate use of personal protective equipment is crucial for protecting both patients and staff from potential infections. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of PPE in radiology departments, as documented by Qu et al. (2020) who described infection control for CT equipment and radiographers' personal protection during the outbreak in China.

In pediatric imaging, PPE requirements should be tailored to the specific procedure and patient population. For example, imaging of patients with known or suspected infectious diseases may require

enhanced precautions, while routine outpatient imaging may require standard precautions only.

Workflow Optimization

Optimizing workflow in pediatric imaging departments can contribute significantly to infection prevention. Carayon and Wood (2010) discuss the role of human factors and system engineering in patient safety, highlighting how process design can reduce infection risks.

Scheduling practices that allow adequate time for cleaning between patients, separating infectious from non-infectious patients in scheduling queues, and designing physical spaces to minimize crosscontamination are all important considerations. The Systems Engineering Initiative for Patient Safety (SEIPS) model developed by Carayon et al. (2006) and later refined (Holden et al., 2013) provides a framework for analyzing and improving work systems in healthcare, including infection control in radiology.

Challenges in Pediatric Medical Imaging Infection Control Unique

Pediatric Considerations

Pediatric patients present unique challenges for infection control in medical imaging. Children may be unable to follow instructions regarding infection control measures, such as maintaining respiratory hygiene or limiting touch of surfaces. Additionally, pediatric patients often require parental or caregiver accompaniment during procedures, increasing the number of individuals in the imaging space. Young children, particularly infants and toddlers, may have frequent diaper changes and accidents, increasing the risk of contamination with bodily fluids. Comfort items such as toys, blankets, or pacifiers brought from home may introduce potential pathogens into the imaging environment.

Knowledge and Compliance Gaps

Several studies have identified knowledge and compliance gaps among radiology staff regarding infection control practices. Abdelrahman et al. (2017) assessed knowledge of nosocomial infection control practices among radiographers in Jordan, while Nyirenda et al. (2018) examined knowledge and practices of radiographers regarding infection control in radiology departments in Malawi. Both studies identified significant knowledge deficits that could compromise effective infection control.

Antwi et al. (2015) specifically investigated infection control practices by radiographers during radiological examinations in Ghana, finding variable compliance with recommended protocols. Fohely et al. (2021) similarly documented infection control practices among radiological technologists in Palestine, identifying areas for improvement.

These knowledge and compliance gaps may be particularly problematic in pediatric settings where the vulnerability of patients demands stringent adherence to infection control protocols. **Resource Constraints**

Resource limitations can significantly impact the implementation of optimal infection control practices in pediatric imaging. Limited availability of cleaning supplies, personal protective equipment, or adequate staffing can compromise adherence to infection control protocols.

In resource-constrained settings, the challenge of maintaining infection control standards while meeting clinical demands can be particularly acute. Hasford et al. (2021) examined knowledge and perception of infection control among allied radiation medicine professionals in Ghana during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting how resource limitations affected practice.

Emerging Infectious Diseases

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the challenges posed by emerging infectious diseases to radiology departments. Stogiannos et al. (2020) outlined what radiographers need to know about COVID-19 in the radiology department, while Tay et al. (2021) discussed challenges and optimization strategies in medical imaging service delivery during the pandemic.

For pediatric imaging specifically, the need to rapidly adapt infection control protocols in response to evolving understanding of novel pathogens presents significant challenges. Balancing infection control with the psychological needs of pediatric patients during periods of heightened infection concerns requires careful consideration.

Implementing Effective Infection Control Programs in Pediatric Imaging

Risk Assessment and Protocol Development

Effective infection control in pediatric imaging begins with comprehensive risk assessment and protocol development. The European Society of Radiology and European Federation of Radiographer Societies

(2019) published a joint paper on patient safety in medical imaging that emphasizes the importance of systematic approaches to identifying and mitigating infection risks.

Risk assessment should consider the specific procedures performed, patient population characteristics, equipment used, and environmental factors within the pediatric imaging department. Protocols should be developed with input from infection control specialists, pediatric specialists, and radiology staff to ensure they are both effective and feasible to implement.

Staff Education and Training

Education and training are critical components of successful infection control programs. Borg (2014) discusses cultural determinants of infection control behavior, emphasizing the importance of understanding drivers and implementing effective changes in healthcare worker practice.

Staff education programs should cover basic infection control principles, department-specific protocols, and the rationale behind infection prevention measures. Training should be provided at orientation and reinforced through regular updates and competency assessments.

Aljondi et al. (2021) assessed knowledge of COVID-19 infection control among healthcare workers in radiology departments in Saudi Arabia, while Almatari et al. (2021) measured awareness of infection control guidelines for patients with COVID-19 in radiology departments, both highlighting the importance of targeted education in improving knowledge and compliance.

Monitoring and Feedback Systems

Regular monitoring of infection control practices and outcomes is essential for continuous improvement. Surveillance systems should track adherence to hand hygiene and other infection control protocols, as well as any healthcare-associated infections potentially linked to imaging procedures.

Quon et al. (2017) described a single-institution practice quality improvement project focused on disinfection of radiologist workstations and radiologist hand hygiene, demonstrating how monitoring and feedback can drive improvements in practice.

Sarvananthan et al. (2021) analyzed rates and reasons for safety incident reporting in the medical imaging department of a large academic health sciences center, highlighting the importance of incident reporting systems that capture infection-related events.

Integration with Hospital-Wide Infection Control Programs

Pediatric imaging infection control should be integrated with broader hospital-wide infection prevention efforts. Coordination with hospital infection prevention teams ensures consistency in approaches and leverages institutional resources and expertise.

Goh et al. (2020) described operational strategies to prevent COVID-19 spread in a Singapore radiology department, emphasizing the importance of alignment with hospital-wide infection control initiatives. Similar integration is crucial for pediatric imaging departments to ensure comprehensive protection for vulnerable young patients.

Value-Based Healthcare and Infection Prevention

The concept of value-based healthcare, as discussed by Brady et al. (2020), has significant implications for infection control in pediatric imaging. By preventing healthcare-associated infections, radiology departments not only protect patient safety but also contribute to improved healthcare value by reducing complications, extended hospitalizations, and additional treatments necessitated by preventable infections.

The financial impact of robust infection prevention programs in pediatric imaging can be substantial when considering the costs associated with treating healthcare-associated infections, particularly in immunocompromised pediatric populations. Investment in infection prevention can therefore align with value-based healthcare principles by improving outcomes while potentially reducing overall healthcare costs.

Human Factors and Systems Approach to Infection Prevention

Adopting a human factors and systems engineering approach to infection prevention in pediatric imaging can yield significant benefits. As outlined by Carayon et al. (2006, 2013), the SEIPS model provides a framework for analyzing how work system components (person, tasks, tools/technology, physical environment, and organization) interact to influence processes and outcomes, including infection control.

Ede et al. (2021) applied human factors analysis to staff expectations regarding non-contact vital sign monitoring in an intensive care unit, while Watt et al. (2019) examined resilience in the blood transfusion process. Similar approaches can be valuable in pediatric imaging to identify system factors that either facilitate or hinder effective infection control practices.

By considering the entire sociotechnical system of pediatric imaging departments, rather than focusing solely on individual compliance with protocols, more effective and sustainable infection prevention strategies can be developed. This approach recognizes that infection control failures often result from system issues rather than individual negligence.

Future Directions and Emerging Technologies Non-Contact and Automated Imaging Technologies

Advances in non-contact and automated imaging technologies offer promising approaches to reducing infection transmission risk in pediatric imaging. Remote control interfaces, voice-activated controls, and automated positioning systems can minimize the need for direct contact with equipment during procedures.

Ultraviolet disinfection systems, rapid-acting disinfectants, and antimicrobial surfaces are being increasingly evaluated for use in healthcare settings, including imaging departments. These technologies may offer additional layers of protection beyond traditional cleaning and disinfection protocols.

Standardization and Guidelines Development

The development of standardized, evidence-based guidelines specific to pediatric imaging infection control represents an important future direction. While general infection control principles apply across healthcare settings, the unique aspects of pediatric imaging merit specialized guidance.

Professional organizations in radiology and pediatric healthcare can collaborate to develop consensus guidelines that address the specific challenges and considerations of infection prevention in pediatric imaging environments.

Research Priorities

Several research priorities emerge for advancing infection prevention in pediatric medical imaging:

1. Evaluation of the effectiveness of specific cleaning and disinfection protocols for pediatric imaging equipment
2. Assessment of the impact of workflow modifications on infection transmission risk
3. Investigation of pediatric-specific factors influencing compliance with infection control measures
4. Development and validation of risk assessment tools specific to pediatric imaging departments
5. Analysis of the cost-effectiveness of various infection prevention strategies in pediatric imaging settings

CONCLUSION

Infection prevention and control in pediatric medical imaging requires a multifaceted approach that addresses equipment, procedures, environment, and human factors. The vulnerability of pediatric patients underscores the importance of stringent infection control practices, while the unique aspects of pediatric imaging present distinct challenges for implementation.

By adopting evidence-based practices, investing in staff education and training, implementing comprehensive monitoring systems, and embracing a systems approach to infection prevention, pediatric imaging departments can significantly reduce the risk of healthcare-associated infections. Integration of infection control efforts with value-based healthcare initiatives further emphasizes the importance of prevention as both a patient safety and economic imperative.

As medical imaging technology continues to evolve, so too must approaches to infection prevention in pediatric radiology. Emerging technologies offer new opportunities for enhancing infection control, while ongoing research provides the evidence base for refining and improving practices. Through continued attention to this critical aspect of pediatric imaging, healthcare providers can ensure that diagnostic imaging contributes to improved health outcomes without introducing preventable infection risks.

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