Infection prevention: Spanning the generations

BY SHANNON DAVILA, RN, MSN, CIC, CPHQ

You can say that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree or maybe that love of nursing and infection prevention is in my DNA. As an infection preventionist (IP), I am privileged to have had mentors throughout my career who supported and guided my path, but above all, one person had the greatest influence. My grandmother, Jacqueline “Jackie” Gamache, was one of the first infection control nurses in the state of Maine. Even now, at age 90, she embodies the wit, compassion, and energy that I continually aspire to have. On a recent visit to Maine, I sat down with her to discuss her experiences over the course of her career.

Shannon: What made you choose the field of nursing, and how did you become involved in infection control?

Jackie: I started my nursing career in 1947 after graduating from Sister’s Hospital School of Nursing in Waterville [Maine] and went to work in the Sister’s Hospital. I worked in different areas of the hospital but eventually settled in the intensive care unit. In 1957, your grandfather and I decided to start our family, so I took some time off from nursing. Ten years and five children later, I was ready to go back to work. At that time, I took a position at Seton Hospital in the intensive care unit, and shortly later the hospital announced a new position, the first...
of its kind, “infection control nurse,” and asked me if I would like to take on the new role. I have always been one for a challenge; don’t forget, I raised five kids! I accepted the job and began a new journey in my career.

**Shannon: Since this was a new position in your hospital, where did you turn for support and resources?**

**Jackie:** In the beginning, I worked closely with our employee health nurse. We made a great team and tackled many of the issues related to employee vaccination and illness. Finding support for the patient infection control issues was more difficult. In the early 1970s, there were three of us (infection control nurses) spread throughout the state. One in the north, one in the south and me in central Maine. We supported each other in those early days, sharing and learning from each other when we could. Fortunately, our New England APIC chapter provided educational conferences in Boston, which was close by, so I would attend those events every year. It was an exciting time to be involved in infection control. The role was expanding quickly, and I enjoyed being part of those early years.

**Shannon: Describe for me what your duties were as the infection control nurse.**

**Jackie:** Most of my day was spent visiting the patient floors. I would review each record, paying special attention to the temperature logs, looking for any sign of infection, especially for patients with urinary
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catheters or post-surgical wounds. These were our high-risk patients. On a monthly basis I would report at the infection control committee any nosocomial or new infections that our patients developed. We didn’t have computers like you have now, so everything we did was by hand, reviewing all handwritten records, and this took a lot of time.

Shannon: What was the most challenging part of your job?

Jackie: I remember in the early 1980s when HIV/AIDS first became known. There was a lot of fear about transmission of that disease among nurses and physicians. Part of my job was to learn everything I could about how to prevent transmission and educate the hospital staff on the correct measures to take. It was hard because the information was so new and people were afraid.

Shannon: You turned 90 years old this year, but your love and memories of nursing and infection prevention remain strong and vivid. What was your favorite part of working in infection control?

Jackie: I enjoyed the investigation aspect of it, doing research and reviewing cases. I also liked teaching others about how to prevent the spread of infections. In the role of infection control nurse, I had a lot of autonomy and could work independently, which I liked.

Shannon: As an infection prevention nurse myself for almost ten years, I have seen many changes in the evolving role of this profession. As someone who has been witness to 50 years of change, what advice would you offer to infection preventionists today?

Jackie: I would say, above anything, enjoy what you do and don’t be afraid to take on challenges! Infection prevention is an exciting field to be in, 50 years ago and today. 

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