

I

nfection Control

Employers are not responsible under UK health and safety legislation for infections that their employees may pick up in the workplace from colleagues. This is because, according to guidance from the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens, the infection is just as likely to be caught outside the workplace as within it. There may, however, be other laws which require the employer to take action, such as regulations on food safety, environmental protection and public health.

It is, in any case, good practice to minimise the risk of infection in the workplace, not least because of the high cost to the business of absenteeism caused by colds, flu, the norovirus and so on. According to some sources, workplace infection control should be based on the assumption that everyone is potentially infectious and that the environment is dirty and covered in germs (see for example www.lexisurl.com/FM14183). This is not as extreme as it sounds as the average workplace is indeed a major source of infection, with staff, customers and visitors frequently partaking in an exchange of bacteria and contagious illnesses.

Workplaces have a high density of people all sharing the same facilities and the same air, often in a fairly enclosed space. The above website claims that the workplace may be one of the most at-risk places in terms of infection, with only planes, public transport, schools, pubs and over-crowded eating and entertainment venues being worse.

Pathogens such as viruses and bacteria can be spread in various ways that require different control strategies. Coughs or sneezes release airborne pathogens in droplets that collect on surfaces or can be inhaled from the air. A person's saliva, bodily fluids or faeces may infect food and contaminate objects like kitchen utensils or crockery. Door handles, lift buttons, stair banisters, photocopiers and printers may be contaminated by contact with dirty hands.

Some pathogens can be transferred by sharing personal items or even by shaking hands. Common objects like pens, pencils, cups, glasses, telephones and keyboards may be contaminated and when the person who has touched them then touches their mouth, nose or eyes, the pathogens are transferred into their body.

Infection control strategies may include the provision of individual supplies of anti-bacterial hand wash and guidelines about how to wash hands properly. Proper hygiene training for cleaners and food safety training for caterers are essential, as are robust regimes for proper control and care of building services.

The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) is the foremost campaigning body for improved environmental health and better infection control www.cieh.org