



Tap out: reducing waterborne *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* transmission in an intensive care unit

M.I. Garvey^{a,b,*}, M.A.C. Wilkinson^a, K.L. Holden^a, T. Martin^a, J. Parkes^a, E. Holden^a

^aUniversity Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, UK

^bInstitute of Microbiology and Infection, The University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, UK

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SUMMARY

Background: *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* is a ubiquitous and important opportunistic pathogen in immunocompromised or critically ill patients. Nosocomial *P. aeruginosa* outbreaks have been associated with hospital water sources.

Aim: To describe engineering interventions to minimize contamination of water outlets and the subsequent clinical impact.

Methods: New tap outlets were fitted at selected outlets across the intensive care unit (ICU). Laboratory testing demonstrated that, following artificial contamination with *P. aeruginosa*, these taps could be effectively decontaminated using a thermal washer-disinfector. Water samples were collected weekly from new outlets on the ICU over an eight-month period and tested for the enumeration of *P. aeruginosa* via membrane filtration. Surveillance of *P. aeruginosa* from clinical specimens was routinely undertaken.

Findings: Prior to the interventions, water sampling on ICU indicated that 30% of the outlets were positive for *P. aeruginosa* at any one time, and whole genome sequencing data suggested at least 30% transmission from water to patient. Since their installation, weekly sampling of the new tap outlets has been negative for *P. aeruginosa*, and the number of *P. aeruginosa* clinical isolates has fallen by 50%.

Conclusion: Installation and maintenance of tap outlets free of *P. aeruginosa* can substantially reduce the number of *P. aeruginosa* clinical isolates in an ICU.

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Introduction

Pseudomonas aeruginosa is a ubiquitous and important opportunistic pathogen in immunocompromised or critically ill patients [1–3]. In the UK, *P. aeruginosa* is responsible for 3% of all reported monospecies bacteraemias [4]. Due to its natural

ability to survive in the moist environment, nosocomial *P. aeruginosa* outbreaks have been associated with hospital water sources [5,6]. In 2013 the Department of Health in England published guidance that included recommendations for sampling of water and implementing control measures where *P. aeruginosa* is found in the water [7].

Water outlets, particularly taps and associated pipework, are a recognized reservoir for micro-organisms, providing a large surface area for biofilms to harbour potential pathogens, such as *P. aeruginosa* [6,8]. Between November 2011 and January 2012, 25 babies admitted to neonatal intensive care units (ICUs) in Northern Ireland acquired *P. aeruginosa*; these

* Corresponding author. Address: University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2WB, UK. Tel.: +44 (0)121 371 3787.

E-mail addresses: mark.garvey@uhb.nhs.uk, m.i.garvey@bham.ac.uk (M.I. Garvey).



Figure 1. Marwik 21, Armitage Shanks tap outlet installed onto ICU A.

incidents were attributed to contaminated tap outlets [6,9]. Further nosocomial *P. aeruginosa* outbreaks associated with hospital water sources have been reported [8,10,11]. Other potential routes of transmission include cross-infection, for example, carriage on the hands of healthcare workers, and through contaminated medical equipment [12,13]. The Department of Health has recently updated the Health Technical Memorandum (HTM) 04-01 which emphasizes the role of water in nosocomial infections and suggests that a risk management approach to the safety of water is pivotal in the control of infection in a healthcare setting [14,15].

We have previously shown that holistic measures, including appropriate tap cleaning and waste water disposal, combined with installation of point-of-use filters, have resulted in reduction of waterborne transmission of *P. aeruginosa* in a tertiary referral hospital ICU [16]. Here we describe the use of an engineering intervention to control *P. aeruginosa* on our ICU.

We specifically investigated whether installation of new tap outlets would have an impact on the number of outlets colonized with *P. aeruginosa* and whether this would have a clinical impact. Secondary aims of the study were to investigate whether *P. aeruginosa* could be removed from contaminated taps, and to determine how often water sampling needed to be undertaken in a setting where contamination of tap outlets with *P. aeruginosa* is high.

Methods

Setting

Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham (QEHB) is a tertiary referral National Health Service teaching hospital in Birmingham, UK. QEHB has one of the largest co-located ICUs in the world with 100 beds and 231 water outlets, of which 130 are clinical outlets. The hospital is funded via a private finance initiative, and was opened in 2010.

Patient surveillance

Surveillance of *P. aeruginosa* in clinical specimens was undertaken as previously described [16].

Water sampling and microbiological methods

Water samples from all outlets on the ICU were collected every six months. These were cultured and *P. aeruginosa* identified as previously described [16]. Additional water sampling was performed from the eight test outlets (see below), and from eight randomly selected control outlets, also on ICU A. All of the test and control outlets were clinical handwash basins.

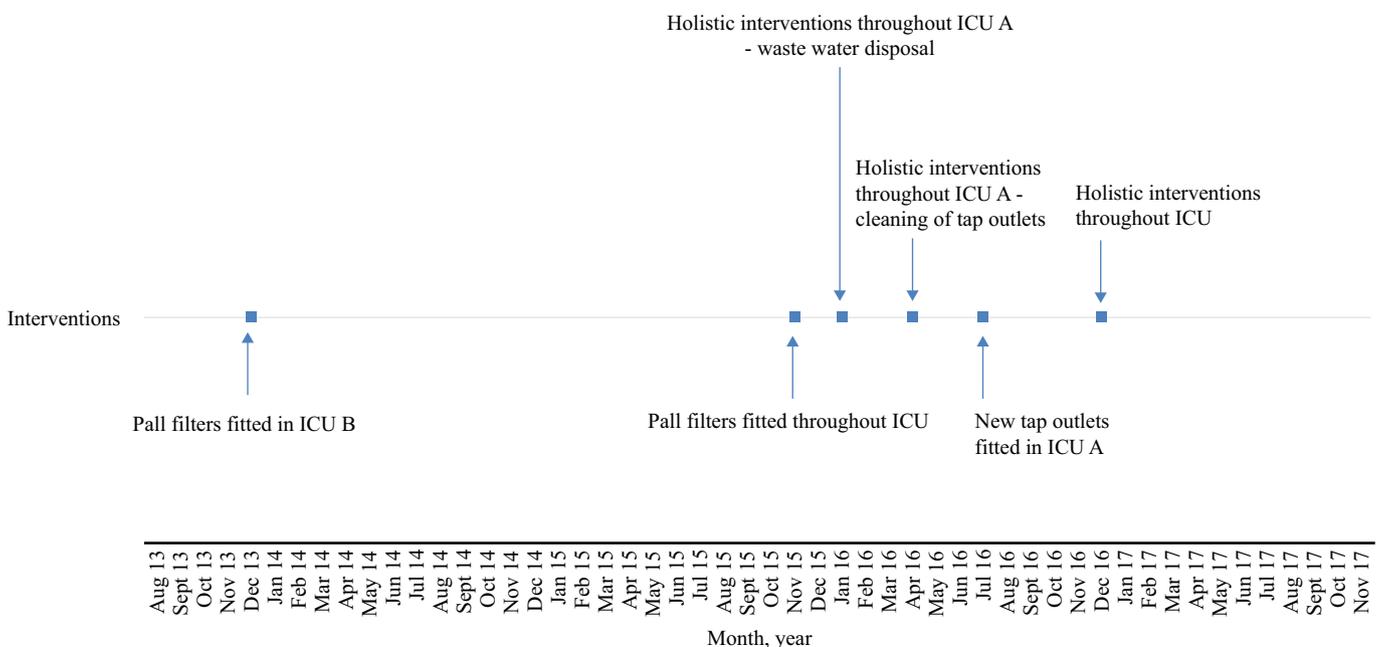


Figure 2. Timeline of interventions during the study.

Engineering interventions

On ICU A, eight new taps (Marwik 21, Armitage Shanks, UK; Figure 1) were fitted at selected bed spaces (Figure 2). These replaced the previous Rada therm 3 (Rada, UK) tap outlets that were installed across QEHB at the time of construction. The new taps were selected on the basis of recommendations from colleagues in other centres that they may be associated with fewer contamination issues with *P. aeruginosa*. The eight-bedded bay on ICU A was chosen because it had a dedicated sluice to facilitate disposal of patient waste water.

Test taps

The Markwik21 tap assembly (Figure 1) is designed to be detached from the water supply, dismantled and subjected to a decontamination procedure. The spout and mixing valve can be removed and access to the pipework achieved by removal of a cover from each end. The components can withstand high temperatures and can be processed in a benchtop thermal washer-disinfector.

Removal of artificial contamination

The initial assessment of the ease of decontamination of the test taps was undertaken with artificial contamination. Two strains of *P. aeruginosa* were used: NCTC 6749 and PS-1054, a clinical isolate from QEHB known to readily form biofilm [17]. A suspension of the test bacteria containing $\sim 10^8$ /mL was prepared in sterile distilled water. The spout, thermostatic mixing valve (TMV) and pipework (Bar) were flushed/immersed in the culture for 30 s. Excess culture was discarded, the components were placed into a sealed plastic bag to retain humidity and were stored at 21°C for seven days to allow biofilm formation. Microbial counts on the components were determined before and after disinfection using a Medisafe Pico thermal washer-disinfector with 3E-Zyme enzymatic cleaner (Medisafe, Stortford, UK). The spout and mixing valve were sampled by placing them in a sterile bag containing one-quarter strength Ringer's solution (Oxoid, Basingstoke, UK) and processing in an ultrasonic water bath for 1 min. The wash fluid was then cultured to determine the number of viable bacteria. The pre-disinfection samples were serially diluted in Ringer's solution, whereas the post-disinfection samples were filtered, and the filter placed on the surface of a culture plate. The pipework was too large to sample in this way, so a manual washing/flushing method was used. This entailed aseptically transferring the bar to a sterile plastic bag, followed by manual elution with 100 mL Ringer's solution. The pre and post samples were plated on to tryptone soya agar plates and incubated for 42–48 h at 37°C, and the numbers of colony forming units (cfu) were enumerated. Tests were performed in triplicate.

The sampling methods were validated by performing a pre-count sampling procedure on a contaminated tap, followed by a further sampling procedure on the same (still contaminated) tap. This allowed the reduction in bioburden due to the sampling procedure to be measured.

Removal of natural contamination

At the conclusion of the 33-week sampling period, two test taps (from ICU A) were removed and disassembled into their

Table I

Total number of intensive care unit (ICU) water outlets positive for *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* per year between 2013 and 2017

ICU	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Area A	20 (29%)	21 (30%)	28 (40%)	29 (41%)	20 (29%)
Area B	11 (22%)	14 (29%)	14 (28%)	10 (20%)	15 (30%)
Area C	8 (15%)	13 (28%)	15 (30%)	12 (24%)	9 (18%)
Area D	7 (10%)	14 (23%)	17 (28%)	22 (36%)	19 (31%)
Total	46 (20%)	59 (26%)	54 (24%)	73 (31%)	63 (27%)

component parts. The spout, TMV, and bar were sampled for pre-counts, processed in a washer-disinfector, and then sampled for post counts in the same manner as for the artificial contamination detailed above.

Holistic interventions

In February 2016 (Figure 2), a revised tap-cleaning method was implemented, as previously described [18]. Patient waste water was disposed of directly into the sluice, or into a macerator after addition of absorbent gel sheets (Figure 2) [16].

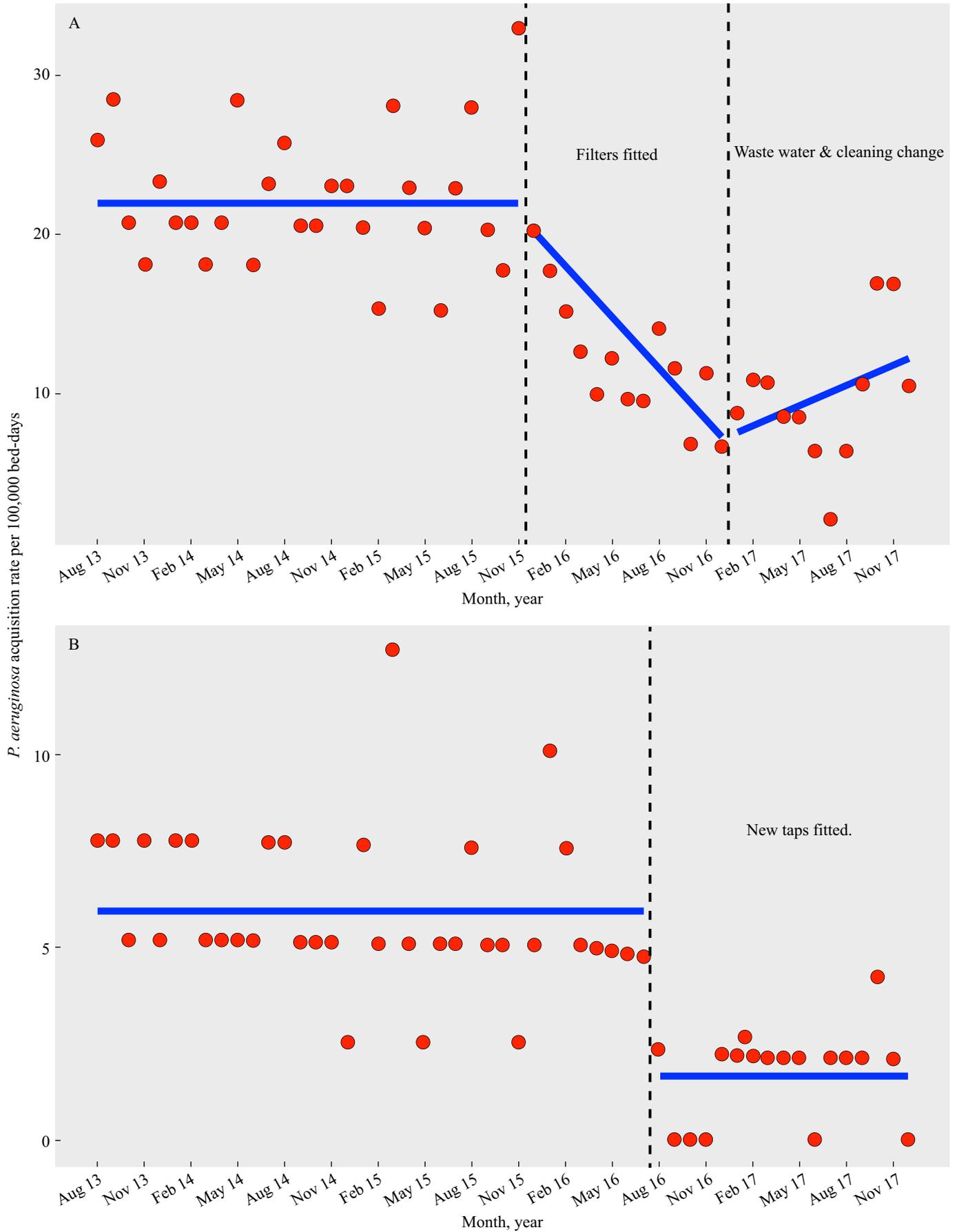
Statistics

Total viable counts and *P. aeruginosa* cfu between the test and control taps were compared using negative binomial regression models in the MASS package in R version 3.5.0 [19]. To determine the frequency of water sampling, Bayesian analysis was used to determine the probability, θ , of a tap being contaminated with *P. aeruginosa*. The Bayesian analysis was performed by hand and subsequently ratified in R [19]. Patient acquisition rates of *P. aeruginosa* per 100,000 bed-days

Table II

The predicted probabilities of (at least one) *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*-positive tap outlet over a six-month period from the different sites, depending upon whether sampling is undertaken monthly or six-monthly

Site	Tap type	Probability of positive isolate	
		Monthly sample	Six-monthly sample
A2 lobby	Control	0.386	0.083
A4	Control	1.000	0.917
A7	Control	0.639	0.167
A10	Control	1.000	0.944
A20	Control	1.000	0.889
A22	Control	0.386	0.083
A25	Control	0.916	0.361
Blood gas	Control	0.639	0.167
A11 lobby	Test	0.146	0.028
A12	Test	0.146	0.028
A13	Test	0.274	0.056
A14	Test	0.146	0.028
A15	Test	0.146	0.028
A16	Test	0.146	0.028
A17	Test	0.274	0.056
Blood gas	Test	0.146	0.028



in ICU overall, and in ICU A separately, were analysed using segmented Poisson regression models in R, using a similar technique to Gebiski et al. [19,20]. Data from the period August 2013 to December 2017 were included in the analysis.

Audits

Monthly audits were undertaken by the infection prevention and control team during the period of this report. These included monitoring the correct disposal of patient waste water and tap cleaning.

Results

Water sampling

From the water sampling undertaken on the ICU, 27% of the outlets were positive for *P. aeruginosa* in 2017 (Table I). Since 2013, there has been a 37% increase in the number of water outlets colonized with *P. aeruginosa* across the ICU (Table I).

Test tap decontamination

Validation of the sampling method showed that the mean reduction in contamination over the serial sampling procedures, calculated using the three components of two taps, was 1.11 log₁₀ units (data not shown). Sampling an artificially contaminated tap showed mean log₁₀ reduction factors after thermal disinfection for the different components of 6.36 for the bar, 6.98 for the TMV, and 6.20 for the spout.

Total viable counts of test tap samples

Approximately one week after the installation of the test taps, weekly sampling commenced. The mean TVC isolated from the 264 control samples was 15,402 cfu, whereas the mean from the same number of test samples was 10,360 cfu. Using a negative binomial regression model the TVCs of test taps were significantly lower than for control taps ($P = 0.000232$).

Pseudomonas aeruginosa isolated from tap samples

Substantial levels of *P. aeruginosa* were recovered from the control taps. However, there were only two instances of contamination of test taps with *P. aeruginosa*; 2 cfu were recovered from one test tap, and 1 cfu from another, as isolated occurrences (subsequent samples from both taps were negative). The mean *P. aeruginosa* cfu isolated from the two sample types were highly divergent (3313.6 and 0.011 for control and test samples, respectively), and a negative binomial regression model confirmed that *P. aeruginosa* counts from the test taps were significantly lower ($P < 2 \times 10^{-16}$).

Tap decontamination redux

After eight months, two test taps were removed and sampled. Although no contamination was recovered from the spout of one of the taps, the other components contained high levels of bacteria. The log₁₀ pre-counts per 100 mL were 5.04 for the other spout, 4.56 and 5.34 for the bars, and 6.68 and 6.78 for the TMVs. The components were then processed through the washer-disinfector and then resampled. All of the post-counts were zero.

Water testing frequency

Bayesian analysis (beta-binomial conjugate model) was used to predict the probability of detecting contamination with *P. aeruginosa* from each control or test tap from water sampling (Table II). The model suggests that monthly sampling detects all the *P. aeruginosa*-positive outlets more assuredly than six-month sampling regimes over any six-month period.

Clinical isolates

The Poisson regression model used to analyse the clinical isolates from ICU as a whole suggests that the two most important interventions were the fitting of filters to selected taps across ICU, and the alteration of the disposal of waste water and cleaning protocols ('holistic factors') (Figure 3A). The model provides very strong evidence that the provision of filters was coincident with a marked reduction in the acquisition of *P. aeruginosa* ($P = 3.73 \times 10^{-8}$). The trend term in the model suggests that, over the 12-month period following the introduction of filters, there was a 67% decrease in the acquisition of *P. aeruginosa* across ICU. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the model provides good evidence that the introduction of 'holistic factors' across the whole of ICU was associated with an increase in the acquisition of *P. aeruginosa* ($P = 0.00135$). By contrast, the regression model used to analyse ICU A alone suggests that the only important intervention was the fitting of the new taps (Figure 3B). The model provides marked evidence that the new taps were associated with a noticeable decrease in the incidence of *P. aeruginosa* acquisition on ICU A ($P = 1.98 \times 10^{-5}$). The model suggests that the introduction of the new taps was associated with an immediate and sustained 72% decrease in the acquisition of *P. aeruginosa* on ICU A.

Discussion

Pseudomonas aeruginosa can persist in hospital water systems for long periods and has resulted in a number of hospital outbreaks [21,22]. We previously reported an outbreak of *P. aeruginosa* in an ICU setting with the source being a colonized tap outlet [2]. Moreover, the number of tap outlets testing positive for *P. aeruginosa* increased from 2013 to 2017 by 37%

Figure 3. (A) Rate of *P. aeruginosa* clinical isolates per 100,000 bed days in the entire critical care. The dotted lines represent the infection prevention and control interventions, which had a significant impact upon the segmented Poisson regression models. The blue lines represent the mean values predicted by the Poisson regression model. (B) Rate of *P. aeruginosa* clinical isolates per 100,000 bed days in the ICU A.

[16]. We subsequently demonstrated that point-of-use filters, together with holistic measures, reduced the number of clinical isolates of *P. aeruginosa* [16]. Point-of-use filters are not the ideal solution, because the filters themselves may become contaminated with *P. aeruginosa* if used inappropriately [23]. Breakpoint models indicated that the engineering and holistic interventions resulted in a 50% reduction in the number of *P. aeruginosa* clinical patient isolates over a year [16]. We have continued our pioneering work in this area by focusing on new engineering control measures and the effect these have in controlling the transmission of *P. aeruginosa* in an ICU setting.

The HTM 04-01 guidance details that when an outlet is positive for *P. aeruginosa*, risk reduction and preventive measures should be considered [14]. These include engineering considerations such as removal of flow straighteners, dismantling of tap outlets for cleaning and disinfection, assessing the water distribution system and components of the tap outlet [14]. Remedial work can be difficult to undertake and there are no standards on the correct procedure. Indeed, we found that despite remedial work on tap outlets, contamination with the same strain of *P. aeruginosa* was seen six months later [2]. For this reason we were interested in a tap outlet that could withstand high-level disinfection. We found in a laboratory setting that a thermal washer-disinfector cycle gave $\geq 5 \log_{10}$ reduction in cfu in three different components of the tap outlet, and, most importantly, a tap outlet that was free from *P. aeruginosa*. However, whereas this first phase of work gave confidence to install the new tap outlets in a clinical area, the artificial system may not represent the formation of biofilm in real-life clinical settings. We found that although the test taps were clear of *P. aeruginosa*, high TVCs were detected as soon as one week after installation. This is not surprising, as water is known to harbour micro-organisms, with biofilms developing quickly [24]. We were then able to establish the feasibility of disinfecting taps in a real-life setting, and it was also shown that the absence of *P. aeruginosa* was sustained, aside from two episodes of low-level and transient contamination.

A review by Loveday *et al.* indicated that there is poor evidence for remediation [21]. However, we found that replacing half the tap outlets on an ICU area resulted in a significant reduction of *P. aeruginosa* clinical isolates based on Poisson regression models.

The frequency of water testing of tap outlets for *P. aeruginosa* was originally recommended to be six-monthly [7]. This recommendation has since been updated, and a risk assessment approach is now recommended to determine the frequency of water testing [14]. However, there is a lack of evidence in the literature as to the appropriate frequency of testing. We have previously suggested that a six-monthly sampling regimen may result in a number of positives being missed [16]. Indeed, Bayesian models predicted that monthly sampling would enhance the detection rate of *P. aeruginosa* in tap outlets and allow problems to be rectified more promptly.

A Poisson regression model identified that the two most important interventions in reducing *P. aeruginosa* were the fitting of filters to selected taps across ICU, and alteration of the disposal of waste water and cleaning protocols. However, these interventions actually appeared to be associated with a slight increase in the number of cases of *P. aeruginosa*; we believe that this was coincidental rather than causative. The regression model used to analyse ICU A alone suggested that the only important intervention was the fitting of the new taps.

The introduction of the new taps was associated with an immediate and sustained 72% decrease in the acquisition of *P. aeruginosa* on ICU A. If these findings were confirmed in larger studies, they would help hospitals decide to invest in replacing taps as a more cost-effective alternative to fitting filters. It must be noted that QEHB is unique in having such a large ICU, and the impact of changing tapes may not be generalizable. However, we believe our results should be helpful to other hospitals faced with ongoing problems with *P. aeruginosa* contamination of tap outlets.

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Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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