A BRIEF HISTORY OF HAND WASHING

Washing your hands may seem like common practice today, but over a hundred years ago people rarely took the time to prevent the spread of germs. It wasn’t until the 1840’s that a doctor named Ignaz Semmelweis demonstrated the importance of routine hand washing.

Dr. Semmelweis worked in the maternity ward of a hospital in Vienna whose patients were dying at an alarming rate. He noticed that student physicians previously working with deceased patients had treated many of the dying mothers.

Because the students didn’t wash their hands between touching the dead and the living (remember, hand washing was not a recognized practice at the time), bacteria from the deceased were often transferred to the mothers via the student’s hands.

After observing the daily routines of the student physicians, Dr. Semmelweis decided to conduct an experiment. He insisted that all students wash their hands before treating the mothers. Despite receiving ridicule for his theory from his fellow doctors, the deaths in the maternity ward fell dramatically – death rates went from 12.24% to 2.3%! Since his medical breakthrough, the value of hand washing is now recognized in healthcare settings, schools, childcare settings, eating establishments, and work places around the globe.

Today, healthcare specialists generally cite hand washing as the single most effective way to prevent the transmission of disease, and since it is a standard now, thousands upon thousands of lives have been saved thanks to Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis’ discovery.