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Hygiene Theater

This originally appeared in Michael L. Tan's Pinoy Kasi, in the Philippine Daily Inquirer, August 12, 2020. This Alerta version expands the article and provides links to additional materials and sources of information.

I've been sprayed with Lysol and doused with colloidal silver solution, both times by well-meaning friends explaining their ablutions were done to protect me, and themselves, from coronavirus.

Last July 27 The Atlantic, an American magazine, published an article by Derek Thompson with the title "[Hygiene Theater is a Huge Waste of Time](#)". Consider my column today to be a Philippine version.

Hygiene theater, so-called because it's really performed for public consumption to give the impression you're doing something, is not just a waste of time but also of money, and, worse, can injure or even kill people.

How did we get to these nonsensical theatrics? It all started early in the pandemic when research articles came out saying the virus could be found on [surfaces, surviving for as long as several days](#). The term "fomite transmission" began to appear frequently in the media, referring to objects and surfaces that could be contaminated by the coronavirus and which would then infect people.

But last month an article appeared in The Lancet, with a title that says it all: [“Exaggerated risk of transmission of Covid-19 by fomites”](#). The author, Emanuel Goldman, is a professor microbiology, biochemistry and molecular genetics at the medical school of Rutgers University and he points out that the studies on Covid-19 transmission through fomites “has been assumed on the basis of studies that have little resemblance to real-life scenarios.”

In lay terms, Goldman told The Atlantic “as many as 100 people would need to sneeze on the same area of a table to mimic some of their experimental conditions.”

In May the US Centers for Disease Control declared categorically that Covid-19 spreads mainly through close contact of people while talking or sneezing and that touching a surface [“isn’t thought to be the main way the virus spreads”](#).

But by then people’s fears had extended from all kinds of hard surfaces to soft materials, including clothes and footwear, spinning off all kinds of preventive measures. [President Trump](#) suggested injecting disinfectants and it would not have been surprising if people did follow his advice.

Colloidal silver, on the otherhand, was described also by The Atlantic as [“snake oil”](#), with worries because it is also often taken internally.

Early during the pandemic, many local governments were spraying vehicles at checkpoints, aiming at the tires. The Department of Health said this was not needed but I remember a local government official who was furious with the DOH order and defiantly declared he would continue.

Late in March, the government’s [Department of Public Works and Highways](#) initiated, nationwide, disinfectant spraying of roads. The [Department of Health issued an advisory](#) shortly after, quoting the World Health Organization to say all that was not necessary and that we needed to be more careful because disinfectants can harm people. It was only late in April that the Department of Interior and Local Governments (DILG) [ordered a stop to the spraying and misting](#) but it seems the spraying has continued, including the use of disinfection tents.

Last May 24, Philippine National Police (PNP) Capt Casey Gutierrez, a physician, Staff Sgt. Steve Rae Salamanca and Cpl. Runie Toledo were rushed to the hospital after [inhaling concentrated disinfectant](#) at the PhilSports quarantine center in Pasig. [Dr. Gutierrez died](#) on May 30.

Physicians [advised Metro Manila official last Friday](#) to terminate these misting activities.

Then you have all these foot baths, again of no proven value and even dangerous. Two Sundays ago I had to go to Quezon Hall in UP Diliman to deliver the commencement speech (which was then broadcast by Facebook). I nearly didn't get to do the speech because I slipped on the required footbath and twisted my back to avoid falling. The footbath contained too much soap or whatever the disinfectant was. Be extra careful if you're elderly.

Still another hygiene theater performance featured on the front page of a daily newspaper: teachers [disinfecting the plastic envelopes](#) for teaching modules. Sadly, a few days later, the [Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources \(BFAR\) was featured in a newspaper article with their advice to use alcohol or bleach](#) to disinfect packages bought from markets.

Sigh. Can't people see why all that is useless? Even if the materials had the coronavirus and you were able to kill it, the disinfectant is not going to keep the materials sterile for more than a few hours. And we go back to the point of the virus not being in large enough numbers to cause an infection.

The greatest danger of hygiene theater is that we get a false sense of security, forgetting masks, handwashing and physical distancing are the proven ways to prevent infection. If you want to disinfect, then handwash with soap and water for at least 20 seconds (singing Happy Birthday twice). Also heed the warning not to touch your face with your hands, unless you've done the handwashing, or used sanitizers. That plus physical distancing, which means avoiding crowds and indoor environments with poor air circulation.

BACK TO BASICS

[I Have Two Hands](#), a Pinoy Kasi article, explains why our hands can be so dangerous and why handwashing so life-saving.

[Why Soap Works](#) packs in information on the history of handwashing and the chemistry and physics behind handwashing with soap. Useful for your science homeschooling. The article notes, too, that you don't need antibacterial soaps to get the job done, and that soap and water works better than sanitizers.

And here's the US Center for Disease Control (CDC's) advice, without theater, for:

- Disinfecting a [building facility](#)
- Disinfecting [a home](#), distinguishing everyday cleaning and the special cleaning required if you are caring for someone with Covid-19
- [Doing groceries safely](#)

Note this: "Do NOT use disinfectants designed for hard surfaces, such as bleach or ammonia, on food packaged in cardboard or plastic wrap."

Finally, a word about "chlorox", which is actually a brand name for sodium hypochlorite. Look at the labels on cleaning products – sodium hypochloride and hydrogen peroxide are the most common effective disinfectants.



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This e-newsletter/blog will appear as needed, calling attention to crucial health issues with information, commentary and analysis, as well as links to additional resources. The newsletter draws on a wide range of publications and media platforms from around the world to help you make informed decisions.



Because of the pandemic, our staff is doing WFH (work from home), out in Pangasinan, Rizal & Metro Manila. Contact us via email: hain@hain.org or visit our site www.hain.org