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## Medonyx cleaning up on germy hands

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[ELLEN ROSEMAN](#)

How can you get doctors to wash their hands?

That's a big question for hospitals. They realize that patients often pick up bacterial infections that make them even sicker once they're admitted.

"It may seem a mystery why doctors, of all people, practice poor hand hygiene," says a column by Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt, published in the *New York Times Magazine* in September.

Dubner is a journalist whose profile of University of Chicago economist Steven Levitt in *The New York Times* led to a bestselling book, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*.

Economics is all about incentives, the authors argue in their book and *New York Times* columns.

By using the right incentives, you can align people's behaviour with a desired outcome.

For example, the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles handed out \$10 Starbucks gift cards to reward doctors for washing up. That helped boost compliance to 80 per cent (from 65 per cent).

The administration then asked top doctors to press their palms into a sterile Petri dish. The resulting images — sent to a lab to be cultured and photographed — were disgusting.

One photograph of bacterial colonies was made into a screen saver, which haunted every computer in the building.

"Hand-hygiene compliance shot up to nearly 100 per cent and, according to the hospital, it has pretty much remained there ever since," the authors say.

Another solution to the problem is a simple wearable alcohol gel dispenser, made in Toronto.

When hospital caregivers wear this dispenser, "they disinfect their hands more often, because barriers to hand hygiene have been removed and cleaning becomes a reflex," said Gilad Shoham, chief executive of Medonyx Inc., in a comment at the authors' blog (<http://www.freakonomics.com>).

Last month, Shoham appeared on the CBC-TV program, *Dragons Den*. He asked for \$200,000 to help the company expand its operations.

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*Dragons Den*, based on a British TV hit, features five multi-millionaires who invest their own capital in fledgling businesses.

Two dragons (Kevin O'Leary and Laurence Lewin) offered \$100,000 each. But another dragon (Robert Herjavec) outbid them with an offer of \$250,000.

The venture capital injection hasn't arrived yet — negotiations are proceeding slowly — but Shoham is thrilled to see the company's sales growing quickly.

"A year ago, our sales were \$10,000 a month. They were up to \$15,000 a month when the *Dragons Den* was filmed in August and \$30,000 to \$40,000 in October," he said.

"We're set to exceed \$100,000 this month. We broke even in the past quarter and we were definitely profitable in November."

The product, called gelFast Anywear, is now being used by staff in the Washington Hospital Center in Washington, D.C., in the emergency and intensive care wards.

There's a large-scale clinical trial by New York University and Columbia University, scheduled to launch on Jan. 1. Others are interested, including a big metropolitan hospital in Toronto, but Shoham can't yet release their names.

Still in his early 30s, he worked in product development at Sunnybrook Hospital's Centre for Aging, now part of the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute.

One of Shoham's brothers, a doctor in Washington, came up with the idea.

Another brother, a business expert in San Diego, helped him get started.

Sales took off, Shoham says, when he developed a new plastic dispenser — about the same size as a pager — that can be worn around the neck or fastened by a clip to a person's clothing. The previous version was hooked onto a belt.

Inside each unit is a disposable cartridge, which contains enough alcohol for one full shift.

Medonyx now does 95 per cent of its manufacturing in Canada rather than in China as before.

The potential market is huge. It encompasses not only hospitals, but also nursing homes and day care centres.

For the three founding brothers, though, communicating their message to North American hospitals is enough work

"We focus on anyone touching patients, primarily doctors and nurses," Shoham says. "The literature suggests doctors have a long way to go. It's more of a logistical challenge."

Medonyx has several more technologies in development, leading to the hope that all caregivers will be equipped with portable hygiene systems one day.

Then, there will be no more excuses for not washing hands and passing on infections.

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**Ellen Roseman's** column appears Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. You can reach her by writing Business c/o Toronto Star, 1 Yonge St., Toronto M5E 1E6; by phone at 416-945-8687; by fax at 416-