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Nursing Strategies for Infection Control in Epidemic Settings

Fatimah Mohammed Aljumaia[1], Michael Mahfouz Alghamdi[2], Ahmed Mohammad Al Jazery[3], Hala Alhomedi Smoma[4], Refah Abdullah Mohammed Aldawsari[5], Abdullah Hamad Almufarrij[6], Nowayer Mohammed Aldosari[7], Entisar Alhumidey Al Safi[8]

1. *Nursing Alomran General Hospital Al-Ahsa*
2. *Nursing Acceptance And Support Department At The Health Al-Ahsa*
3. *Nursing Patient Services Alhasa*
4. *Nursing King Salman Hospital Riyadh*
5. *Technician Nursing Wadi Aldawsari Hospital Wadi Aldawsari*
6. *Nursing Tumair General Hospital Tumair*
7. *Technician Nursing Wadi Aldawsari Hospital Wadi Aldawsari*
8. *Nursing King Khaled Hospital Hail*

Abstract

The evolution of infection control in healthcare spans centuries, rooted in foundational principles established during the 19th century and continually refined through scientific advancements. This review explores the multifaceted role of nurses in infection prevention, highlighting their leadership in implementing evidence-based practices, adapting to global health emergencies, and addressing healthcare-associated infections (HAIs). Nurses play a critical role in infection control during pandemics, serving as the first line of defense in preventing the spread of infectious diseases. During global health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses demonstrated exceptional adaptability by managing patient surges, ensuring compliance with hand hygiene and personal protective equipment (PPE) protocols, and innovating infection control strategies in resource-limited settings. Nurses also played a key role in outbreak surveillance, contact tracing, and the implementation of isolation measures to curb transmission. Their proactive involvement in education—training healthcare staff and communicating effectively with patients and communities—was instrumental in promoting adherence to infection control practices. This review underscores the importance of nurses as leaders and educators in infection control during pandemics. Their ability to adapt protocols, advocate for infection prevention measures, and deliver patient-centered care amid crisis conditions positions them as indispensable in safeguarding public health and managing future outbreaks effectively.

Introduction

The discipline of infection control in the United States originated in the 1950s, prompted by a nationwide outbreak of nosocomial infections caused by Staphylococcus aureus and the growing recognition of the need for systematic infection surveillance within hospitals (Scheckler et al., 1998). However, the foundational concepts of infection control and epidemiology predate the germ theory of disease. Two landmark historical examples underscore these early developments and the challenges faced in gaining acceptance for infection prevention practices. In 1846, Hungarian physician Ignaz Semmelweis observed a stark disparity in mortality rates from childbed fever between women attended by midwives and those attended by physicians. His analysis revealed that medical students often transitioned directly from autopsies to obstetric care without proper hand hygiene, transferring cadaverous materials to patients. Semmelweis introduced mandatory hand washing with a chlorinated lime solution before patient contact, which dramatically reduced maternal mortality rates (Noakes et al., 2008). Similarly, in 1854, British physician John Snow

used epidemiological methods and statistical analysis to trace the source of a cholera outbreak in London to a contaminated water pump. Snow's work demonstrated the role of fecal–oral transmission in the spread of cholera (Weber et al., 2010).

The field of infection control in healthcare has evolved significantly over centuries, shaped by the foundational principles introduced during the 19th century and continuously refined through advancements in science and technology. Florence Nightingale's revolutionary focus on sanitation and hygiene during the Crimean War marked the beginning of organized infection prevention. Her emphasis on cleanliness and environmental health laid the groundwork for modern nursing practices and infection control protocols (Yana & Turkowski, 2024). Subsequent breakthroughs, such as Joseph Lister's development of antiseptic techniques in the late 1800s (Michaleas et al., 2022), and the introduction of antibiotics in the 20th century, transformed healthcare by drastically reducing mortality from infections (Zhou, 2023).

In more recent decades, the rise of healthcare-associated infections (HAIs), particularly those caused by multidrug-resistant organisms (MDROs), has posed new challenges to infection prevention. These organisms, including pathogens like carbapenem-resistant Enterobacteriaceae and Acinetobacter baumannii, are associated with significant morbidity and mortality, highlighting the need for robust infection control strategies (De Angelis et al., 2012). Advances in environmental disinfection, such as the use of hydrogen peroxide vapor systems, have emerged as effective tools to reduce the burden of these pathogens in healthcare settings (Rutala & Weber, 2016). Global health emergencies, including the 2003 SARS outbreak, the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, and the 2012 MERS outbreak, highlighted the critical role of infection control in containing the spread of disease. These events underscored the importance of rapid surveillance systems, the consistent use of personal protective equipment (PPE), and adherence to hand hygiene protocols. During the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare systems worldwide faced unprecedented challenges in maintaining infection control amidst resource shortages and surging patient numbers (Yen et al., 2014). In these crises, nurses played an indispensable role, adapting to evolving protocols, implementing preventative measures, and educating patients and communities (Liu et al., 2020).

Nurses' contributions to infection control extend beyond direct patient care. They play a critical role in training and mentoring healthcare teams, leading environmental hygiene initiatives, and participating in antimicrobial stewardship programs. For example, in intensive care units (ICUs), nurses' vigilance in monitoring central lines and catheters has been linked to significant reductions in bloodstream infections and other HAIs (Blot et al., 2023). Moreover, their involvement in hospital-wide surveillance and data-driven interventions ensures timely responses to emerging infection threats (Durrheim et al., 2001).

This review examines the multifaceted role of nurses in infection control, emphasizing their leadership in implementing evidence-based strategies and their ability to adapt to evolving challenges. By analyzing historical developments, and contemporary practices, it highlights the centrality of nursing in safeguarding patient safety and public health.

1. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Usage and Hand Hygiene

Effective infection control in hospitals is a cornerstone of patient safety, aiming to minimize healthcare-associated infections (HAIs). HAIs pose significant risks due to prolonged hospital stays, increased healthcare costs, and elevated mortality rates (Kubde et al., 2023). Comprehensive infection control programs often combine preventative measures like hand hygiene, environmental disinfection, and isolation practices. Hand hygiene is one of the most effective strategies to combat HAIs (WHO, 2014). Evidence demonstrates that compliance with hand hygiene practices significantly reduces the transmission of multidrug-resistant organisms (MDROs) like methicillin-

resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) and vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE). A pivotal study by Song et al. demonstrated the critical relationship between hand hygiene compliance and the risk of methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) acquisition. According to their findings, improving compliance from suboptimal levels (<60%) to excellent levels (≥90%) corresponded with a 24% reduction in the risk of MRSA acquisition for each incremental level of improvement. Notably, compliance levels exceeding 80% resulted in a striking 48% reduction in MRSA risk (Song et al., 2010). This reduction highlights the significance of even modest improvements in compliance, particularly in high-risk healthcare environments. Supporting these findings, two additional clinical studies reported significant decreases in the incidence of MRSA, carbapenem-resistant Pseudomonas aeruginosa, and resistant Escherichia coli in wards achieving compliance. The wards that demonstrated the most substantial increases in compliance observed the greatest reductions in infection rates, underscoring the direct correlation between adherence to hand hygiene protocols and the containment of MDROs (Gall et al., 2020). D'Agata et al. (2012) analyzed the effectiveness of various infection control strategies using a mathematical model. Their findings revealed that enhancing hand hygiene compliance had a slightly greater impact on reducing MDRO colonization compared to improving adherence to contact precautions. Specifically, a 20% improvement in hand hygiene compliance was associated with an 8% to 12% reduction in colonization, whereas a comparable 20% increase in compliance with contact precautions resulted in a reduction of 6% to 10%.

Nurses are pivotal in safeguarding patient safety and public health by acting as the first line of defense in infection control. Their comprehensive role encompasses direct patient care, adherence to standard infection control protocols, and the implementation of effective prevention strategies (Gupta et al., 2022). Among the most critical measures are hand hygiene, the appropriate use of personal protective equipment (PPE), and rigorous environmental cleaning. Hand hygiene is universally recognized as the most effective means of reducing the transmission of healthcare-associated infections (HAIs). Studies demonstrate that proper hand hygiene alone can prevent up to 50% of Healthcare-associated infections (HAIs), making it a cornerstone of infection prevention (Wynn, 2021). Nurses consistently lead in promoting hand hygiene compliance by modeling best practices, educating patients and caregivers, and monitoring adherence within healthcare teams.

The proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE) further underscores nurses' crucial role in infection prevention. During epidemics, nurses rely on PPE such as gloves, masks, gowns, and face shields to protect themselves and their patients from cross-contamination. Effective PPE use requires proper training, meticulous technique, and adherence to protocols, all of which nurses advocate and ensure among healthcare teams. Research during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of adequate PPE supplies and training in reducing nosocomial infections and protecting healthcare workers (Fernandez et al., 2020). Furthermore, nurses play a critical role in addressing barriers to PPE use, such as discomfort, shortages, or improper usage, thereby ensuring optimal safety for patients and staff.

Environmental cleaning is another domain where nurses excel in infection control. High-touch surfaces in healthcare facilities, including bed rails, doorknobs, and medical equipment, harbor pathogens that contribute to the spread of infections. Nurses work closely with infection control teams to identify high-risk areas, oversee cleaning protocols, and educate auxiliary staff on proper disinfection practices. These interventions have been shown to significantly reduce the burden of pathogens in clinical environments, lowering infection rates (Ghafoor et al., 2021). Nurses also advocate for the use of evidence-based disinfectants and innovative cleaning technologies, such as

ultraviolet (UV) light sterilization, further advancing the efficacy of environmental hygiene measures (Ji & Ye, 2024).

2. Surveillance and Outbreak Management

Nurses are key players in surveillance and outbreak management, acting as the backbone of infection control in healthcare settings. They identify at-risk patients, track infection patterns, and respond to outbreaks through contact tracing, isolation protocols, and antimicrobial stewardship. This multi-dimensional role is critical to controlling infections, reducing hospital-acquired infections, and improving patient outcomes. Surveillance is one of the primary responsibilities of nurses in infection control. Nurses actively monitor patients and healthcare environments for signs of emerging infections. In a study conducted in Mpumalanga, South Africa, infection control nurses (ICNs) demonstrated the effectiveness of a nurse-led surveillance system in controlling cholera outbreaks, with timely detection and containment preventing secondary cases (Durrheim et al., 2001). Similarly, a study in Polish hospitals revealed that ICNs spent a significant portion of their time detecting and recording HAIs, showcasing the importance of their role in identifying early warning signs of outbreaks (Wałaszek et al., 2018). During outbreaks, nurses are also central to the coordination of infection control responses, including contact tracing, isolation, and staff training. In the context of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak, ICNs played a crucial role in implementing control measures and ensuring compliance with protocols, helping to curb the spread of the infection (Cha et al., 2017). Moreover, studies in U.S. hospitals have shown that ICNs' ability to enforce proper hand hygiene and use of personal protective equipment (PPE) is critical in managing infectious outbreaks (Emori et al., 1980).

Communication is a critical aspect, facilitating the implementation of new strategies and protocols while managing patient, family, and community concerns. A study on the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV) epidemic in Saudi Arabia examined how nurses' roles shifted to accommodate infection control measures, patient education, and coordination with other healthcare providers. Nurses identified the need for enhanced communication and resource availability as central to improving their preparedness for future epidemics (Stirling, 2017). Effective communication is also pivotal in overcoming role ambiguity during crises. A study on emergency nurses' practices during epidemics revealed that their responsibilities expanded significantly, often requiring them to act as educators and coordinators in addition to their direct patient care duties. However, this role expansion sometimes caused confusion and stress, underscoring the importance of clear communication within healthcare teams and with patients to align expectations and improve efficacy (Lam et al., 2019). Another study examined the experiences of nurse managers during the MERS-CoV epidemic, highlighting the challenges they faced in disseminating information and managing their teams in a high-stakes environment. These managers reported that effective communication helped mitigate confusion and fostered team cohesion, allowing for better implementation of infection control protocols (Kim & Park, 2019). Furthermore, the study found that regular updates and feedback loops improved nurses' confidence and competence, particularly when dealing with unanticipated challenges.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, communication played a central role in adapting nurses' roles to meet unprecedented demands. Nurses were tasked with educating patients and the public about preventive measures, managing fears surrounding the pandemic, and implementing complex safety protocols. A systematic review of nurses' experiences during pandemics emphasized the importance of clear and timely communication from healthcare leaders to equip nurses with the knowledge and tools needed for effective care delivery (Fernandez et al., 2020). Lastly, a study from Taiwan during the SARS epidemic revealed how public health nurses utilized structured

communication strategies to manage large-scale community quarantine measures. These nurses faced significant challenges in maintaining public trust while enforcing strict isolation protocols. The study found that nurses' confidence in handling outbreaks was strongly linked to the quality and frequency of epidemic-related updates provided to them by health authorities (Hsu et al., 2006).

Nurses are also educators, ensuring that healthcare teams, patients, and families understand and comply with infection control measures. During outbreaks, training led by nurses significantly improves compliance with preventive measures. In one study, scenario-based training enhanced the preparedness of nursing students to manage cross-infections effectively, including those caused by methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) and norovirus (Mikkelsen et al., 2008). Another study highlighted the role of ICNs in intensive care units, where bedside teaching and procedural revisions led to a 42% reduction in device-related infections over five years (Venberghe et al., 2002).

3. Role of Infection Control Nurses in Intensive Care Units (ICUs)

Emergency nurses have consistently reported expanded roles and responsibilities during epidemics, including direct care for infected patients and educating teams about infection control protocols. These roles are critical in responding to public health emergencies and require significant adaptability. They highlighted increased responsibilities during epidemics, often facing role ambiguity due to expanding duties in infection control and patient management (Lam et al., 2019). Nurses also reported the necessity to adapt protocols in response to evolving situations, which included continuous education and improvisation (Lam et al., 2020).

Research underscores the critical impact of full-time infection control nurses (ICNs) in Intensive Care Units (ICUs), particularly during outbreaks, where their specialized knowledge and proactive involvement can significantly reduce device-related infections and improve patient outcomes. In one study, ICUs that had a full-time ICN experienced a 42% reduction in device-related hospital-acquired infections (HAIs) over three years and a 33% reduction over five years. The success of these interventions was attributed to revising infection control procedures, performing regular surveillance, and providing bedside teaching to healthcare workers during outbreaks (Venberghe et al., 2002). The presence of ICNs not only improves infection control outcomes but also enhances compliance with best practices among ICU staff. A study in the United States found that ICNs played a pivotal role in reducing bloodstream infections and ventilator-associated pneumonia by rigorously monitoring adherence to hygiene protocols and catheter maintenance bundles. These nurses also provided ongoing education to staff, addressing gaps in knowledge and emphasizing the importance of infection control measures (Emori et al., 1980).

Additional evidence from a multi-center study revealed that ICNs were instrumental in managing outbreaks of multi-drug-resistant organisms (MDROs) in ICUs. Their involvement in surveillance, early detection, and immediate implementation of isolation protocols helped to contain the spread of pathogens such as methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) and carbapenem-resistant Enterobacteriaceae. This study emphasized that ICNs' ability to integrate data from microbiology labs and bedside observations was key to their success (Craig et al., 2018). ICNs also play a crucial role in building staff confidence and improving team dynamics during outbreak management. A systematic review of ICUs during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how ICNs fostered a culture of safety by conducting risk assessments, advocating for proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE), and leading training sessions on infection prevention protocols. Their consistent presence and leadership were associated with decreased anxiety among staff and increased adherence to preventive measures (Fernandez et al., 2020). Finally, a review of ICNs'

activities in ICUs during SARS outbreaks demonstrated the critical value of continuous surveillance and immediate corrective actions. ICNs actively collaborated with multidisciplinary teams to refine workflow processes, including aseptic techniques and patient isolation procedures, thereby reducing transmission risks and protecting both patients and staff (Hewlett & Hewlett, 2005). This proactive approach not only minimized infection rates but also ensured preparedness for future outbreaks.

A 2023 study analyzed factors affecting ICU nurses' practices in infection control. Results indicated that awareness of infection control protocols significantly influenced nursing practices, with enhanced education and training programs improving outcomes. This study underscores the importance of ongoing education tailored to ICU environments to strengthen infection control measures (Lee & Yang, 2023). A 2016 study in a Delhi-based super specialty hospital demonstrated that structured training sessions on infection control standards significantly improved ICU nurses' knowledge, attitudes, and practices. This intervention led to higher compliance with standard precautions and highlighted the critical role of ICNs in fostering a culture of safety (Kaushal, 2015). A quasi-experimental study in 2017 evaluated the effects of educational modules on ICU nurses' abilities to prevent CLABSIs. The study found that nurses who received theoretical and practical training demonstrated significant improvements in infection control practices, reducing CLABSI rates and enhancing patient safety (El-sol & Badawy, 2017).

4. Tailored infection control measures during epidemics

Tailored infection control measures during epidemics ensure that the specific needs of diverse healthcare settings are met. By addressing the unique challenges faced by nursing homes, home care settings, outpatient clinics, hospitals, and resource-limited facilities, these strategies enhance safety and reduce the transmission of infections effectively. Nurses are central to implementing tailored infection control measures during epidemics, adapting strategies to meet the unique challenges of different healthcare settings. In nursing homes, nurses lead surveillance programs, identify early signs of infection, and ensure compliance with outbreak management protocols. A 2021 study underscored the importance of nurse-led initiatives in nursing homes, such as staff education, resident health monitoring, and antimicrobial stewardship programs. These nurse-driven interventions significantly reduced infection rates and improved outbreak management outcomes (Sturm et al., 2021). In home care settings, nurses are vital in educating patients and caregivers about infection prevention. This role becomes critical during epidemics, as these settings lack the institutional infection control systems of hospitals. Nurses ensure that patients and their families understand proper hand hygiene, safe disposal of medical waste, and the importance of following isolation protocols. During the SARS epidemic, nurses provided tailored guidance to home care providers, reducing the risk of household transmission and ensuring safe caregiving practices (Hsu et al., 2006). In outpatient clinics and primary care settings, where high patient turnover increases infection risks, nurses are critical in managing patient triage, monitoring hygiene compliance, and implementing respiratory hygiene measures. Research during past epidemics revealed that nurses played a leading role in maintaining adherence to infection control protocols, including educating patients on mask usage and personal hygiene. A study of outpatient clinics during the SARS epidemic highlighted how nurses developed workflows to separate suspected cases from other patients, minimizing cross-contamination (Turnberg et al., 2008).

In hospitals, especially intensive care units (ICUs), nurses implement tailored infection control measures for high-risk patients. Nurses regularly monitor invasive devices like central lines and urinary catheters to prevent infections such as central line-associated bloodstream infections (CLABSIs). A 2023 study demonstrated that ICUs with dedicated infection control nurses

experienced significant reductions in device-associated infections due to their adherence to evidence-based protocols and real-time staff training (Sobeh et al., 2023). In resource-limited settings, nurses adapt infection control measures to the constraints of their environment. They often develop simplified protocols and lead training initiatives to bridge gaps in resources and knowledge. For example, in Yemeni hospitals, nurses successfully adapted infection control strategies despite shortages in supplies and infrastructure. These nurse-led adaptations significantly improved the knowledge and practices of healthcare workers, demonstrating the critical role of nurses in overcoming systemic barriers (Alrubaiee et al., 2017).

A 2020 study explored the experiences of nursing students deployed during epidemic outbreaks. The findings emphasized the importance of enhanced infection prevention education tailored to epidemic scenarios. This study highlighted the need for programs that equip future nurses with the knowledge and skills to address specific infection risks in various healthcare settings, from home care to intensive care units (Goni-Fuste et al., 2021). A retrospective case study examined the effects of healthcare-associated infectious disease outbreaks on nurses in an acute care hospital in Canada. This research revealed the critical need for nurses to adapt their infection control strategies to outbreak-specific challenges, such as increased patient complexity and expanded infection prevention and control (IPAC) measures (Musau et al., 2015).

A 2023 study evaluated the compliance of nurses with infection prevention measures in a rural hospital in Indonesia. The results showed that tailored infection control strategies were critical in overcoming limited resources and infrastructure, with a focus on patient-specific risks and environmental challenges (Puspitasari & Hutahaean, 2023). A randomized controlled trial in 2023 also demonstrated that implementing high-quality nursing interventions in hospital wards significantly reduced nosocomial infections. The study emphasized the role of nurses in applying tailored patient-centered infection control measures that addressed environmental hygiene, patient education, and personalized care (Chen & Liu, 2024).

5. Nursing approaches to infection prevention amid the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the critical role of nurses in infection control, as they implemented strategies to prevent the transmission of the virus in clinical and community settings. Their efforts ranged from ensuring compliance with infection prevention protocols to educating the public and managing healthcare facility outbreaks (Akbar et al., 2022). A study conducted among nurses in Wuhan, China, revealed gaps in their knowledge of COVID-19 prevention measures, despite demonstrating strong adherence to basic infection control practices such as hand hygiene and environmental cleaning. The study concluded that targeted training on COVID-19 protocols is crucial to enhancing nurses' infection control practices (Jin et al., 2020). Similarly, a study in Indonesia found that nurse compliance with standard precautions was significantly influenced by the availability of infection prevention facilities and adequate training (Muhammad & Muliana, 2022). Nurses played a pivotal role in educating communities on COVID-19 transmission prevention. A study in urban Indonesia highlighted the importance of nurses as health educators in raising awareness about preventive behaviors, such as proper mask use and social distancing, especially in resource-limited settings. The lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) posed significant challenges, affecting nurses' ability to perform educational outreach safely (Nasirin & Lionardo, 2020). In resource-constrained environments, nurses demonstrated remarkable innovation by adapting infection control measures to available resources. A study in Indonesia revealed how nurses developed cost-effective PPE alternatives and improvised isolation facilities to maintain safety standards (Puspitasari & Hutahaean, 2023). These strategies ensured continuity of care while minimizing risks in under-resourced healthcare systems.

Nursing homes also faced unique challenges during the pandemic due to the vulnerability of their residents. A study analyzed infection prevention citations in nursing homes during COVID-19 and found that lapses in PPE use, hand hygiene, and transmission-based precautions were common. Nurses were integral in addressing these gaps through staff training, surveillance, and the implementation of tailored infection control measures (Kelly et al., 2023). They were heavily involved in surveillance and outbreak management during the pandemic. For example, a study in Ghana explored the experiences of nurses implementing COVID-19 preventive protocols. The findings highlighted the importance of their roles in identifying transmission pathways, improving PPE distribution, and adapting protocols to the realities of healthcare settings (Adokiya et al., 2023).

However, nurses experienced significant psychological stress while managing infection control during the pandemic. A cross-sectional study in Saudi Arabia found that nurses perceived themselves as highly at risk of contracting COVID-19 and took extensive precautions, including avoiding crowded places and temporarily staying away from home to protect their families. This underscores the ethical burden faced by nurses in balancing professional responsibilities and personal safety (Elneblawi et al., 2022). Moreover, they innovated to maintain infection prevention standards despite shortages of PPE and other resources in resource-limited healthcare settings. A study in Taiwan emphasized how nursing personnel played a frontline role in reducing nosocomial infections through rapid case identification, procedural adaptations, and education on protective measures (Liu et al., 2020). A study in Indonesia revealed how nurses developed cost-effective PPE alternatives and improvised isolation facilities to maintain safety standards (Puspitasari & Hutahaean, 2023). These strategies ensured continuity of care while minimizing risks in under-resourced healthcare systems.

Conclusion

Nurses are at the forefront of infection control during pandemics, playing a critical role in preventing disease transmission and safeguarding public health. Despite significant challenges, including heavy workloads, psychological stress, and logistical barriers, nurses continue to lead infection control efforts with resilience and dedication. Addressing systemic challenges, such as resource shortages and limited access to training in under-resourced settings, is critical to empowering nurses to sustain high standards of infection control globally. As pandemics remain a recurring threat, the central role of nurses in infection prevention must be acknowledged and supported through investments in education, infrastructure, and resources. Strengthening their capacity to adapt and lead in crisis situations will be essential for safeguarding public health and ensuring resilience in the face of future global health emergencies.

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