Overcome pride, embrace positive change

By Chaplain Michael W. Anderson

Humanity has a stubborn streak that impedes individual and societal progress and fosters a false sense of pride, which can be very dangerous. We have seen it at work, at home, and in our communities. "Sea Lawyers" know it all, and automatically fear and ridicule change. Family members complain about change because "that's the way we've always done it," routines are disrupted and comfort zones feel invaded. Communities shun the effectuation of change out of fear of the unknown, a fear of failure, a fear of public humiliation, or a fear of "rocking the boat."

Take the story of Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis as an example. Semmelweis was a Hungarian physician and professor of the maternity clinic at the Vienna General Hospital in 1847. While on the job, he noticed that mothers in the medical students' ward had a six times greater chance of infection than mothers in the midwives' ward at the hospital. Since this infection often proved to be fatal to both mother and child, these statistics really bothered him. As a result, he set out to learn what he could do to lower that higher rate of infection in that ward.

Upon review of each ward's practices, Semmelweis realized that the midwives practiced hand-washing and area cleaning before and after births occurred. The medical students, on the other hand, were desensitized to the gore inherent to 19th century medical practice and viewed hand hygiene as a waste of valuable time.

Semmelweis instituted a procedure that required everyone who came in contact with a patient to wash their hands in an antiseptic solution. The rate of infection for patients treated by his students dropped immediately.

You would think that the medical community at the time would treat him as a hero, but, to the contrary, the medical community largely ignored, rejected or ridiculed his findings. He was dismissed from the hospital and shunned by his professional peers.

Semmelweis' experience led people to create the expressions "Semmelweis reflex" and "Semmelweis effect" as a metaphor for the knee-jerk rejection of knowledge because it contradicts entrenched norms.

There will always be those who suffer from the Semmelweis reflex when it comes to their spirituality, morality and relationships with others. As the permanent change of station season, deployments and school vacations commence, remember Semmelweis when facing potential changes, innovations or improvements to the way things are done at work, at home, and in your community.

Come 'n get it!

CS3 Nestor Arevalo from Grand Prairie, Texas, prepares pasta prior to lunch at the Commodore Matthew C. Perry General Mess "Jewel of the East" dining facility at Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka. The award-winning facility, which was runner up in the 2010 Capt. Edward F. Ney Memorial Award in the overseas general mess gategory, has won 11 consecutive 5-star awards for excellence. The awards encourage excellence in Navy food service programs, with the objective of improving the quality of life for our Navy personnel.

U.S. Navy photo by MC3 Charles Oki