International trade agreements

ICN Position:

International trade agreements affect health services and the personnel who deliver them. The International Council of Nurses (ICN) urges national nurses associations (NNAs), governmental and non-governmental agencies to closely monitor the development and impact of international trade agreements that affect health and social policy.

The impacts of trade agreements on access to health services, employment opportunities of health personnel and professional regulation are of particular interest and relevance to nurses. Where these agreements are linked to privatisation and commercial development of the health sector, this needs to be monitored and controlled within a framework that guarantees a population’s access to health services. ICN, as the voice of nurses and nursing, promotes policies that improve the delivery of health services, including sound labour policies, financing structures and regulatory mechanisms. ICN denounces policies, including trade agreements that have a negative impact on the quality of health care provided.

As professional organisations, ICN and NNAs endorse the principle of equity in the delivery of health services (i.e. Health for All). ICN condemns attempts to facilitate the international mobility of health personnel at the expense of patient safety (e.g. creating pressure to lower professional accreditation standards or threaten their consistent application).

ICN protects and promotes the nursing profession’s right to coherent self-regulation. Therefore, ICN encourages the creation of nursing legislation or regulatory policies, as a fundamental tool to define education and practice standards for international comparison and provide the regulatory framework in international trade agreements dealing with professional services (e.g. mutual recognition agreements).

The delivery of quality care depends on a safe working environment and optimal working conditions. International trade agreements must therefore include labour and environmental standards that foster quality care and provisions related to their enforcement. NNAs must be a social force in international trade negotiations and be given access to relevant information.

In addition, ICN and member associations must work strategically with others in health care so as to influence international trade agreements that have an impact on patient, family and public health, health sector human resources, and health care delivery systems in general.
Background

International trade agreements have traditionally focused on the trade of goods and commodities. The scope of these agreements has now expanded to include international trade in a broader range of services, including health services. A new generation of associated regulatory, labour, competition and quality assurance issues therefore need to be addressed.

The health sector is increasingly influenced by bilateral and multi-lateral economic policies and agreements. Internationally negotiated instruments generate opportunities as well as challenges. A real concern, however, is the extent to which such agreements weaken and/or restrict governmental input, professional regulatory mechanisms and the maintenance of non-profit, public social and health services.

The rapidly changing balance between public and private sector in health care delivery affects equity, quality of care, access to health service delivery and labour relations. The impact of trade or economic interests on health sector reform needs to be monitored (e.g. substitution of qualified staff or the de-professionalization of care providers, migration of health care workers, privatisation of education, deregulation of providers).

Nurses are major providers of health services. The care delivered by nurses as well as their working conditions are affected by international trade agreements. They must have access to information and decision-making bodies at all levels if they are to effectively represent the ongoing interests of the nursing profession and the general public, while influencing policies that affect the quality and safety within the health sector.

Adopted in 1999
Reviewed and reaffirmed in 2004 and 2009

Related ICN Positions:
- Nurses and primary health care
- Participation of nurses in health services decision-making and policy development
- Publicly funded accessible health services
- Ethical nurse recruitment
- Nurse retention and migration

The International Council of Nurses is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality nursing care for all and sound health policies globally.