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**Health Workforce in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: From COVID–19
lessons to action. Item 3(c). EM/RC70/5**

Honourable Chair, distinguished representatives, esteemed colleagues,

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) acknowledges the WHO Regional Committee of the Eastern Mediterranean Region for bringing to the forefront the pressing issue of the health workforce and its pivotal role during and after the COVID–19 pandemic. We appreciate the efforts and findings presented in the EMRO paper, which highlights the indispensable importance of the health workforce, particularly nurses.

Drawing from our recent report, 'Recover to Rebuild – Investing in the nursing workforce for health system effectiveness,' ICN reiterates the increasing evidence of the debilitating challenges the nursing workforce confronts. The adverse impacts of stress and burnout are taking their toll. The prevailing poor working conditions, violence in the workplace and unsafe staffing levels have become glaringly evident and necessitate immediate attention. The foundation of the ICN report underpins a critical message: without substantive investment in well-prepared nurses, an effective health care system recovery and rebuild remains elusive.

It is alarming that the repercussions of the COVID–19 pandemic are leading to an exodus of nurses from the profession and a reduction in the number of student applications. If current trends persist, the global community may face a daunting challenge to replace up to 13 million nurses in the imminent future. This scenario not only jeopardizes the delivery of current services but also threatens the broader goals of universal health coverage (UHC) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In our Charter for Change, ICN lays out 10 imperative policy actions for governments and employers that are pivotal to sculpting health care systems that are robust, affordable, accessible and responsive, ensuring nurses are central, recognized and indispensable to the health of our nations.

The EMRO paper's comprehensive insights on investing in the health workforce, with its emphasis on economic growth, job creation and health security, are commendable.

The stark figure of only 7% of development assistance for health being directed towards the health workforce between 1990 and 2020 in low- and middle-income countries is an alarming testament to the historical underinvestment in this sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably accentuated the essence of maintaining workforce budgets and channeling both domestic and external investments into the health workforce. This is paramount to ensure that health professionals are not only attracted and retained but are also adequately equipped, motivated and supported.

ICN firmly endorses the action areas delineated in the EMRO paper, and we emphasize four further actions, namely:

1. Implement recommendations outlined in ICN's 2023 Recover to Rebuild and ICN 2023 Charter for Change reports.
2. Strengthen primary care, addressing the evident gaps highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic through optimizing nursing's contribution.
3. Implement and report on the recommendations outlined in the WHO Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery 2021–2025 and support the proposed development of the second WHO State of the World's Nursing report.
4. Collaborate with ICN: ICN is dedicated to the global advancement of nursing. We invite Member States to leverage our resources, insights and expertise, particularly with the lens of our recent reports.

In closing, ICN reiterates its unwavering support for the WHO Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery and eagerly anticipates the upcoming State of the World's Nursing report. We urge all stakeholders present to acknowledge the undeniable value of the nursing workforce and to pledge their commitment to the transformative actions needed to ensure the health and well-being of populations globally.

Thank you.

Links

- ICN 2023 Recover to Rebuild: Investing in the nursing workforce for health system effectiveness - https://www.icn.ch/sites/default/files/2023-07/ICN_Recover-to-Rebuild_report_EN.pdf
- ICN 2023 Charter for Change - https://www.icn.ch/sites/default/files/2023-07/ICN_IND_2023_Report_EN.pdf