

ICN AT WHA79: NURSING POWERS AT THE HEART OF GLOBAL HEALTH DECISION-MAKING



The International Council of Nurses (ICN) brought a strong nursing voice to the 79th World Health Assembly (WHA79), which closed on Saturday 23 May, demonstrating that empowered nursing workforces advance the full global health agenda, from health emergencies and primary health care to the economics of health for all. ICN brought the clear evidence-based messages that empowered nurses save lives, that nursing is not a cost, but an investment with powerful returns, and that no resolution passed at WHA can become reality without investing in a structurally empowered nursing workforce.

WHA79 convened against a backdrop of escalating public health emergencies, including hantavirus and devastating Ebola outbreaks in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda. ICN has been [raising the alarm](#) that these outbreaks have tragically cost health workers their lives, with nursing leaders once again reporting a lack of PPE and fears for their safety. Simultaneously, the world faces wider challenges, including geopolitical uncertainty, climate crises, and conflicts along with rising health demands, severe cuts to global health funding, and the ongoing restructuring of the World Health Organization (WHO). All of this made WHA79 a defining moment for global health leadership and made ICN's presence, voice, and advocacy more vital than ever.

ICN's impact across WHA79

ICN had a major presence and programme at WHA79, with an in-person delegation led by ICN President José Luis Cobos Serrano and including ICN's First Vice President Sineva Ribeiro, CEO Howard Catton, Senior Policy Advisors Erica Burton and Hoi Shan Fokeladeh, ICN Alliance of Student and Early Career Nurses (SECN) Chair Josephine

Ageyi, and Communications Advisor Gillian Moore – together with a virtual delegation of over 150 nurse leaders from around the world.

ICN delivered individual [statements](#) at member state discussions on key WHA79 agenda items including mental health (item12.2), communicable diseases and immunization (12.3), universal health coverage (12.4), the Global Code for International Recruitment of Health Personnel (12.8), and health emergencies (14.1). ICN also co-led or joined constituency statements on the economics of health for all (15.5), health in the 2030 Agenda (12.6), digital health and AI (12.10), and reform of the global health architecture and UN80 initiative (20.1).



Across the week, ICN hosted major events, participated in over 50 meetings, side events, and meetings and strengthened collaboration with WHO leadership, nursing and health leaders, and global partner organizations.

ICN President José Luis Cobos Serrano highlighted the vital importance of nursing empowerment and protection at WHA79:

‘Dr Tedros’s World Health Assembly opening address recognized that the largest part of the world’s health worker shortage is nurses, a shortfall that requires bold and immediate action to close. With a continued global shortage of 5.8 million nurses, less than four years to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including Universal Health Coverage (UHC), and the latest WHO data warning that the world is on course to miss every single health target by 2030 if we do not take action, investing in the nursing and health workforce has never been more urgent.

‘Just before the World Health Assembly, we marked [International Nurses Day](#) with

the theme *Our Nurses. Our Future. Empowered Nurses Save Lives*. We brought the evidence of our new model of nursing powers to the world's most important health policy forum at WHA79, including the power of trust, the power of numbers, as the world's largest health workforce, the power of practice, care and proximity, and, importantly, the power of peace.

'Through ICN's [#NursesforPeace](#) initiative and humanitarian work and advocacy, we continually work to protect nurses and all health workers. At WHA79, Dr Tedros described rising attacks on health care as the "alarming and illegal new normal in conflict", echoing ICN's warnings. ICN says clearly: No nurse should ever be a target. There can be no global health security without protecting nurses on the frontlines of every health emergency, from conflicts to Ebola.'

Key bilateral meetings

ICN President José Luis Cobos Serrano held a series of high-level bilateral meetings across the week to discuss in-country nursing situations and current and potential ICN support with delegations including Brazil, Norway, Cambodia, Barbados, Latvia, Palau, and the Philippines. ICN's President and CEO met with nursing leaders from across the globe, as well as with a wide range of health organizations and partners including the International Confederation of Midwives, Direct Relief, the World Organization of Family Doctors (WONCA), and the World Innovation Summit for Health. ICN's President and CEO also held a number of Ministerial discussions across the week.



Core events

ICN hosted and participated in major side events at WHA79, with the ICN Headquarters serving as a central hub for global nursing and health workforce discussions throughout the week. These included:

ICN and WHO co-hosted event at ICN Headquarters, "Strengthening Nursing for Global Health" (18 May), where ICN and WHO leaders, including WHO Chief Nursing Officer Amelia Latu Afuhaamango Tuipulotu and WHO leaders alongside ICN's President, First Vice President and CEO reinforced ICN and WHO's strong continued partnership and central role of nurses in advancing global health priorities.



ICN Nurses Luncheon (20 May), with over 50 high-level guests – including the WHO Chief Nursing Officer, national Chief Nursing Officers and nursing leaders, Health Ministers and a wide range of partner organizations including ICM, ILO, and ICRC – joining ICN's in-person delegation, led by ICN's President and First Vice-President, and ICN's 150-person Virtual Delegation. Impactful speeches were delivered by WHO's Chief Nursing Officer, ICN's President and CEO, ICN's Senior Policy Advisor Erica Burton and SECN Chair Josephine Agyei.



ICN WHA79 Luncheon

WHPA Leadership Gathering and side event (17 & 19 May): As one of the founding members of the World Health Professions Alliance (WHPA), ICN co-hosted a leadership gathering and side event. ICN's President spoke emphasizing the evidence-based case for interprofessional collaboration and bold investment in health professionals, with First Vice President Sineva Ribeiro and SECN Alliance Chair Josephine Agyei also participating, and ICN CEO and WHPA Chair Howard Catton moderating the sessions.



ICN and World Health Professions Alliance (WHPA) event

CoNGO event at ICN Headquarters (21 May): With the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO), ICN co-hosted an event bringing together 25+ health NGO representatives to explore creating a new NGO

Committee on Health as a coordinated civil society platform for a stronger, united health voice within the UN system.



Ministerial Dialogue on health worker mobility (21 May): Hosted at ICN Headquarters and convened by Global Health Partnerships, the Philippines, and representatives from the Global South, this dialogue brought together Health Ministers from the Philippines and Jamaica and senior representatives from Ghana and other states to advance south-to-south collaboration on workforce strengthening and ethical recruitment. ICN CEO Howard Catton spoke on the need to go beyond production and pipelines to invest in supportive conditions and enabling environments that retain nurses.



Ministerial Dialogue on health worker mobility at ICN HQ

ICN also spoke at or participated in major events on health and peace, health workforce financing, emergency care, people-centred primary health care, AI and digital health, access to care in crisis settings, adult immunization, healthy longevity, and the Lancet MedZero launch, hosted by organizations including the World Bank, the Global Fund, and WHO regional offices.

Key WHA79 outcomes

ICN First Vice President Sineva Ribeiro reflected on the Assembly's outcomes and the centrality of the nursing leadership voice, saying:

"WHA79 was a week of strong ICN advocacy, bringing the full nursing powers and voice to every high-level agenda item, side events and meeting. This week showed beyond a doubt that nurses do not only implement health policy, they shape it, at national, regional, and global levels. It has never been clearer that the global health agenda is a nursing agenda. Across all of the WHA79 outcomes, from emergency preparedness to the economics of health for all, the nursing and health workforce is the essential force that turns policy into practice and resolutions into reality. We must now empower nurses and nurse leadership to deliver on these outcomes."

Highlights include:

The economics of health for all: The Assembly adopted a landmark Strategy on the Economics of Health for All (2026–2030), with ICN co-leading a constituency statement making the strong case that investing in the nursing workforce delivers powerful returns for health, societies, and economies. This builds on ICN's sustained work to bring the economic power of nursing care to the highest levels of decision-making, including through our [IND reports](#) and work with the World Economic Forum.

Fair international recruitment and the Global Code: Member States approved a resolution to amend the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel — its first update in 16 years. The adopted resolution incorporates recommendations for co-investment in source countries' health systems, extends the Code's scope to cover health personnel recruited abroad to work as care workers, and clarifies the need for ethical, equitable recruitment in pandemics and other health emergencies. ICN delivered a strong statement calling for the global health workforce to be treated as a global public good; for collective co-investment mechanisms shared by major recruiting countries; decent employment, education, and retention in source countries; and urgent policy dialogue with source countries as equal partners. This builds on years

of ICN advocacy, including a [recent letter to WHO Member States](#) and [participation in the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group inquiry](#).

Health emergencies and protecting health workers: ICN delivered a statement highlighting the immense toll on nurses, strongly condemning all attacks on health care and calling for accountability under international humanitarian law. ICN made urgent calls for protection and support of nurses and health workers in all health emergencies, from disease outbreaks to conflicts, throughout the week, and highlighted ICN's ongoing [#NursesForPeace](#) initiative and humanitarian work and advocacy, including recent [submissions to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) and [Special Rapporteur](#).

Universal health coverage, mental health, communicable diseases and immunization, and digital health: ICN delivered statements or participated in constituency statements on each of these critical areas, demonstrating nursing's centrality to the full breadth of the Assembly's work, and building on ICN's work on these areas (e.g. [UHC work](#), [Guidelines on Mental Health Nursing](#), [Position Statement on Digital Health](#), [PHC report](#)).

The Pandemic Agreement: Member States have extended negotiations on the PABS Annex, delaying the operationalization of the Pandemic Agreement. ICN continues to call for a strong Agreement that protects nurses and health workers: the world's nurses paid with their lives during COVID-19 because the world was not sufficiently prepared, and the current Ebola and other outbreaks underscore why finalizing the Agreement, prioritizing health equity and a prepared, protected workforce, is so essential.

ICN CEO Howard Catton highlighted the importance of looking forward and delivering on WHA79 commitments:

"As Dr Tedros said in closing this Assembly, 'Every resolution you adopt, every agreement you reach, only has value when it changes what happens in a clinic, in a community, or in a household – when a health worker has what they need to do their job.' Nurses are global health policy made real, through their incredible powers to save and improve the lives of individuals and entire populations.

"At last year's WHA, Member States gave clear direction to not only extend but accelerate the [Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery](#), which ICN lobbied hard for, all based on the vital data in the State of the World's Nursing Report I was proud to co-chair on behalf of ICN. We must now take that mandate and also make sure that this year's WHA commitments are translated into funded national nursing workforce plans, decent working conditions, and the structural empowerment, protection, and safety that supports nurses' full impact.

"As WHO enters a new era, ICN will drive forward our work to protect all nurses, to ensure that nursing remains at the very heart of global health decisions, and to support and enable every nurse and nursing association, for the good and health of all."

Read all [ICN WHA79 Statements and Key Messages](#)

Read the [IND 2026 Report: Empowered Nurses Save Lives](#)

Look out for ICN's full WHA79 report coming soon!