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Mental health preparedness and response for the COVID-19 pandemic

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The International Council of Nurses (ICN) recognises the importance of mental health preparedness and response, and strongly supports the WHO recommended actions to minimise the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic is having severe consequences on the mental health and wellbeing of people across all ages, genders and socioeconomic levels, and has magnified the existing global crisis in mental illness and substance use disorders.

Nurses have an invaluable role in promoting mental health, preventing mental illness and providing person-centered mental health care. We need nurses now more than ever in order to support the COVID-19 response and to ensure the delivery of mental health services.

The impact on the mental and physical health of nurses and other healthcare workers should not be overlooked. The growing physical and mental demands have posed unprecedented pressure on the health workforce. ICN's recent report shows that in every region of the world nurses are reporting extremely concerning and rising rates of mental distress. This rise is the result of issues including inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE), persistent high workloads, fear of spreading the virus to family and an increase in violence against nurses.

ICN is extremely concerned about the longer-term consequences of the pandemic. Healthcare workers are disproportionately affected and at risk of full-blown stress response syndromes, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic illness and burnout. Service disruptions, underfunding and continued neglect of mental health will increase the number of nurses leaving the profession, worsening future nursing workforce shortages and exacerbating the global emergency in mental health.

To protect the health and uphold the human rights of billions of people, ICN urges governments to place mental health at the centre of national COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery plans. ICN also calls on governments to urgently scale up investment for sustainable community-based mental health services and support services.