



# ICN KEY MESSAGES 79TH WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY

## BRIEFING

### ICN BRINGS A STRONG MESSAGE TO #WHA79: INVEST IN NURSING POWER FOR HEALTH, ECONOMIC GROWTH & GLOBAL STABILITY

As health leaders gather in Geneva for the 79th World Health Assembly (WHA79), the International Council of Nurses (ICN) is taking the global voice of nursing to the centre of international health policy discussions at a critical moment for global health.

Highlighting the scale and strategic ambition of ICN's engagement at WHA79, ICN President José Luis Cobos Serrano said:

"ICN is bringing a major programme to this year's World Health Assembly and I am delighted to lead our in-person delegation along with First Vice President Sineva, CEO Howard Catton and others and our virtual delegation of over 100 nurse leaders from all around the world.

"Throughout WHA week, ICN will demonstrate the breadth, scale and leadership of nursing's contributions to global health. **We are making the powerful case that structurally empowering the world's nurses is the surest way to meet today's health challenges and bring care to all people** – and we are calling for the investment and policies that enable nurses to deliver their full impact consistently and at scale."

Based on ICN's recent IND report, [Empowered Nurses Save Lives](#); our [Charter for Change](#); [Definitions of Nursing](#); the [WHO Strategic Directions for Nursing and](#)

[Midwifery](#); and the WHO and ICN [State of the World's Nursing report 2025](#), ICN will amplify a clear, evidence-based set of priority messages across every level of engagement throughout the week.

ICN First Vice President Sineva Ribeiro highlighted the urgent political and financial context facing WHO and WHA79, and why the global health agenda must be a nursing agenda:

“This is a vitally important World Health Assembly. Rising global health challenges, acute funding limitations, and geopolitical instability demand bold action. It is also the beginning of a new era for WHO, with organizational restructuring and the start of the process to elect the next Director-General. ICN is ensuring that the world's 30 million nurses are represented at the very heart of these decisions.

What we are telling decision-makers is: *Invest for Impact*. **The nursing workforce is not a cost – it is one of the highest-return health investments any country can make.** The nursing and health workforce must be at the centre of decisions on universal health coverage, primary health care, emergency preparedness, mental health, the economics of health for all, and every other priority on the Assembly's agenda.”

### ICN engagement at WHA79

Throughout WHA79, ICN will deliver statements on key WHA agenda items, host and present at important side events, and participate in over 50 meetings and events across the week, including bilateral meetings with Member States, WHO leadership, and global partners. Events hosted by ICN include:

- 18 May: ICN and WHO co-hosted event: Strengthening Nursing Engagement in Global Health
- 20 May: Annual ICN Nurses Luncheon, convening nurses, government representatives, partners and stakeholders to strengthen relationships, reinforce shared priorities and drive the global nursing agenda.

### What's covered in this briefing:

**A.** Background and context: why this WHA matters

**B.** ICN's priority messages: an evidence-based path forward

Empowered Nurses Save Lives: The 7 nursing powers at WHA79

1. Invest for Impact: The economics of health for all

2. Key health topics: mental health, primary health care, communicable diseases & immunization, digital health
3. Fair nurse recruitment and migration: the Global Code
4. Health emergencies, conflict, protecting nurses & the power of peace

Closing call to action

Resources and links

## **A. Background and context: why this WHA matters**

WHA79 arrives at an exceptionally consequential moment for nursing and global health.

**Global nursing and health workforce pressures, health demands, and global uncertainty.** The world faces a continued shortage of 5.8 million nurses, alongside rising demands on health systems, growing health needs, widening inequalities, conflict, humanitarian emergencies and growing pressure from climate-related crises. At the same time, health systems everywhere are struggling to recover from years of workforce strain, underinvestment and burnout. Without the nursing and health workforce to deliver care, no health resolution passed in Geneva can become reality on the ground. **This WHA must keep the health workforce at the centre of every discussion.**

**Urgent action needed on global commitments.** With less than four years left to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Universal Health Coverage (UHC) targets all Member States committed to, the world is significantly off track. **This WHA must be an opportunity for urgent progress – a turning point where commitments are matched with funded action and investment in nurses, the largest health workforce vital to bringing health for all.**

**A new era for WHO – and a critical moment to prioritize nursing and health workforce.** At the same time, WHO itself is entering a new era, as it reshapes, re-sets priorities, and opens the new WHO Director-General election process. With severe cuts to WHO funding budgets, staff, and programmes, it is vital that we advocate to make sure that the health workforce, the backbone of care, is not de-prioritized in this next chapter for WHO.

It is **critically important that WHO's health workforce function remains strong.** This **must include the continued impactful WHO Chief Nursing Officer role**, vital not only at WHO but as a central point for national Chief Nursing Officers around the world, whose roles must be enabled with sufficient resources and decision-making power.

Wider health funding and development aid is also under acute pressure, with major financing reductions and geopolitical uncertainty. In these constrained funding environments, ICN is making the economic case loud and clear: investment in nurses and the health workforce is a non-negotiable foundation for health systems, delivers powerful returns on investment, and is needed to achieve every other health goal on the WHA agenda.

## **B. ICN's priority messages: an evidence-based path forward**

At WHA79, ICN will not only highlight these challenges, but demonstrate that there is a clear, evidence-based pathway forward.

### **Empowered Nurses Save Lives: The 7 nursing powers at WHA79**

**This year's IND report, [\*Our Nurses. Our Future. Empowered Nurses Save Lives\*](#), reframes how the world understands nursing.**

For too long, nursing has been viewed through a narrow, one-dimensional lens. ICN's new model presents nursing as a multidimensional force for health, economic resilience, equity and peace, expressed through **seven core nursing powers**: the Power of Trust, the Power of the Professional, the Power of Numbers, the Power of Practice, the Power of Care, the Power of Proximity and the Power of Peace. Each of these powers is grounded in clear evidence showing **the measurable impact of nursing** in improving mortality and health outcomes, strengthening primary care, increasing access, supporting social cohesion and contributing directly to stronger economies and healthier societies.

*Just one striking example: Closing health workforce gaps – with nurses as the largest part of that workforce – could **save 189 million years of life and add USD 1.1 trillion to the global economy** by 2030.*

ICN will take the evidence, case studies and policy solutions from our IND report into the World Health Assembly to make a compelling, data-driven case for structurally empowering nurses to save and improve lives, strengthen health systems, and build healthier economies and more stable societies.

### **ICN's priority messages on key WHA79 agenda items**

ICN's WHA79 messages and interventions span the Assembly's most important topics.

[Click here to find all ICN statements](#)

## 1. Invest for Impact: The economics of health for all

**Agenda item:** 15.5 – Draft strategy on the economics of health for all (ICN constituency statement)

WHA79 will discuss the draft global strategy on the economics of health for all, **a major opportunity to reframe health spending as economic investment rather than cost**. Through our constituency intervention with partner organizations, ICN is bringing a strong message, backed by comprehensive data, that investment in the health and nursing workforce is among the highest-impact investments countries can make for health, economic growth and social resilience.

### ICN's key messages:

- The draft strategy must explicitly recognize the health and nursing workforce as the foundation of health system resilience and economic productivity.
- **Invest for impact!** The nursing workforce is **not a cost – it is an investment in people, economies and societies**. Every [\\$1 invested in better health yields economic returns of \\$2–4; returns of up to 1:14 for preventive health](#).
- Investing in nursing – a workforce that is 85% female – also means **investing in women's leadership and gender equity in health**

This builds on ICN's work including our report [Our Nurses. Our Future. The Economic Power of Care](#); our IND 2026 report; our recent [World Health Professions Alliance letter to WHO urging explicit, actionable recommendations for sustained investment in the health workforce](#); and our consistent work bringing the economic message to the highest levels of decision-making, including at the [World Economic Forum in Davos](#).

## 2. Key health topics: mental health, primary health care, communicable diseases & immunization, digital health

**Agenda items:** 12.2 – Mental health (ICN individual statement); 12.5 – Primary health care (ICN individual statement); 12.3 – Communicable diseases: Immunization Agenda 2030 (ICN individual statement); 12.10 – Harmonization of regulatory approaches for data, digital health and AI (WHPA joint statement)

These agenda items span the breadth of what nurses deliver every day – from mental health and primary care to immunization and digital transformation. Taken

together, they **demonstrate both the breadth of nursing's contribution to health and the urgent need for sustained workforce investment to enable that impact.**

### **ICN's key messages:**

**Mental health:** All nurses, regardless of specialization, play a vital role in mental health prevention, care and recovery. Urgent investment is needed in mental health nursing, alongside strengthened nurse leadership and expanded roles within interprofessional teams. The mental health of nurses themselves must also be addressed as a workforce priority: nurses are experiencing a crisis in burnout and wellbeing, and the *State of the World's Nursing 2025* revealed an alarming lack of mental health supports for nurses, which cannot continue.

**Primary health care and universal health coverage:** Nurses are the world's largest, most trusted health workforce and the most widely distributed with the power of proximity to patients and communities. Investing in sufficient, supported, empowered nursing roles, including Advanced Practice, is essential for PHC and UHC. There can be no health for all without nurses for all.

**Communicable diseases and immunization:** As the most trusted health profession and significant providers of immunization globally, nurses bring essential expertise, leadership and practice to address under-vaccination, counter misinformation, build public confidence and improve coverage. Nurses must be empowered, enabled and engaged in planning, delivery and leadership of Immunization Agenda 2030.

**Digital health and AI:** Nurses are already leading on integrating digital tools effectively and ethically into care and leadership. Digital health must remain human-centred and equitable, and nurses must be involved as leaders in designing, implementing and governing AI and digital technologies. This must involve protection of patient confidentiality and data and ensuring that nurses and health workers are adequately trained in AI and digital tools, ensuring that all tools support human-centred nursing care.

**These themes build on ICN's recent work** including our [Nursing and Primary Health Care](#) report; [Guidelines on Mental Health Nursing](#); consistent advocacy on supporting the mental health of nurses themselves, including the [Caring for Nurses Strengthens Economies](#) report; and ICN's [Definitions of Nursing](#), which demonstrate the full range of nursing's contribution across all areas of health.

### 3. Fair nurse recruitment and migration: the Global Code

**Agenda item:** 12.8 – Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel (WHPA joint statement)

WHA79 will consider the report of the Expert Advisory Group on the WHO Global Code of Practice – the framework that governs how countries recruit health workers across borders. **With workforce shortages intensifying globally and migration and inequitable international recruitment increasing, ICN is calling for this Assembly to be a turning point**, with clear, concrete commitments to fair and ethical recruitment practice and reinvestment in fragile countries recruited from.

#### ICN's key messages:

- The global health workforce is **a global public good and collective, worldwide action is needed** to protect it.
- Current patterns of international recruitment are inequitable and unsustainable. Fragile countries are losing their nurses, including specialist and experienced nurses, which is **depleting vulnerable health systems, undermining years of training investment, and widening global health inequalities**.
- We cannot meet our global health commitments and achieve Universal Health Coverage while the workforce sustaining the world's most fragile health systems is being depleted through inequitable recruitment.
- WHA79 must be a turning point: we are making **strong calls for collective co-investment mechanisms shared by major recruiting countries**; investment directed towards decent nursing employment, education and retention in source countries; and urgent policy dialogue including source countries as equal partners.

This builds on ICN's recent work including our letter with proposals to countries leading Member State consultations on the Code and [our participation in the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group inquiry](#) whose report – informed by ICN evidence – recognized the huge sums saved by high-income countries who recruit abroad and the severe harms caused by unethical recruitment.

### 4. Health emergencies, conflict, protecting nurses & the power of peace

**Agenda items:** 14.1 – WHO's work in health emergencies (ICN individual statement); 13.2 & 13.3 – International Health Regulations / Pandemic Agreement

WHA79 discussions will address WHO's work in health emergencies as well as the ongoing negotiations on the Pandemic Agreement. Nurses are on the frontlines of every health emergency, every conflict, every humanitarian crisis. Rising attacks on health care in conflict are gravely concerning and cannot be normalized. Through ICN's intervention, engagements, and ongoing #NursesforPeace campaign, ICN is bringing a clear message: **nurses must be urgently protected in conflict and health emergencies, and the world must invest in nursing power for global health security and stable, peaceful societies.**

Recent and tragic global health events, including concerns around the Hantavirus outbreak the devastating news that nursing and health workers have died following the Ebola outbreak in DRC and Uganda, remind us why health workers' safety and support must be at the centre of the global health agenda. These events **only reinforce the urgent need for a strengthened, resilient, prepared and protected health workforce as the foundation of effective emergency preparedness and response.** This also reinforces the need to finalize the WHO Pandemic Agreement PABS Annex, ensuring equitable access and resources in global health emergencies.

#### **ICN's key messages:**

- ICN strongly condemns all attacks on health care and calls for protection of health personnel, patients and health care facilities as mandated by international humanitarian law.
- Impunity normalizes and perpetuates violations, enabling further attacks and creating a devastating cycle of harm: ICN calls for accountability for violations of International Humanitarian Law.

**This builds on ICN's recent work** including our input to the UN report on human rights protection for women and children in conflict zones (May 2026), drawing on direct consultations with National Nursing Associations in countries experiencing the world's most severe conflicts; the Eastern Mediterranean Region IND journal; and our ongoing humanitarian work and [ICN #NursesforPeace Campaign](#) providing direct support to nurses and NNAs in conflict-affected countries as well as advocacy.

#### **A closing call to action**

#### **ICN CEO Howard Catton said:**

"After this World Health Assembly, Member States will leave Geneva with resolutions on UHC, on PHC, on preparedness, on mental health, on digital health, on the economics of health for all, and more. But no resolution delivers itself.

Nurses are global health policy made real, through their incredible powers to save and improve the lives of individuals and entire populations.

Throughout WHA week and beyond, ICN will continue to make sure that **wherever decisions are made about global health, nursing is at the table, and the world's 30 million nurses are heard.**

This week, we bring the evidence that empowered nurses save lives and a clear roadmap for action. Structural empowerment is the key: we are calling for the investment, policies, leadership and conditions that enable nurses to deliver their full powers consistently and at scale. That is what we mean by 'Invest for Impact.'"

### **Key links & resources**

- ICN WHA79 webpage
- IND 2026 Report: [Our Nurses. Our Future. Empowered Nurses Save Lives](#)
- ICN [Charter for Change](#)
- ICN [Definitions of Nursing](#)
- [WHO Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery](#) (extended to 2030)
- WHO and ICN [State of the World's Nursing report 2025](#)
- [ICN #NursesforPeace Campaign](#)