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Protecting nurses and other healthcare workers tops ICN's agenda after WHO Executive Board meetings

Geneva, Switzerland, 27 January 2021 – As the World Health Organization (WHO) ends its 148th Executive Board meeting in Geneva, the International Council of Nurses (ICN) reiterates its calls for nurses to have early access to the COVID-19 vaccination.

ICN Chief Executive Howard Catton [said](#) making nurses and other healthcare workers a priority to receive the vaccine globally will protect them and enable them to continue caring for the sick: not doing so would give an advantage to the virus.

He also called on governments to ensure that the vaccine is distributed equitably to prevent the exacerbation of the already stark health inequalities that exist between rich and poor countries.

Speaking after the meeting Mr Catton said:

“I agree with WHO Director General Dr Tedros when I say that the world is on the verge of a moral catastrophe because of the inequality of access to the COVID-19 vaccine. Last year we called for nurses and healthcare workers to be prioritised for the vaccines once they became available. But we are hearing from our associations that progress has been slow and unequal.

‘That’s why we are repeating that call for nurses to be a high priority group. Let’s be clear: we expect nurses and healthcare workers in low and middle-income countries to receive the vaccine before younger people who do not have underlying conditions in high-income countries. Because we know the huge pressures nurses are under, that infection rates are high and more than 2,200 of them have died from the virus.

‘Our recent [report](#) highlighted the mass traumatisation of nurses right around the world. And we know that 89% of nurse shortages are in low and middle-income countries, which can least afford to lose any more of their precious nursing staff. And 90% of the world’s nurses are women, and access to vaccines is a gender equality issue.

‘Nurses and the principle of equality must be at the heart of the reset of our health systems that was called for at the WHO board meeting. If not, the virus will find us out and exploit those inequalities. None of us is safe until all of us are safe.’”

Earlier ICN made interventions at the WHO board meeting related to the COVID-19 Response, Mental Health Preparedness and Response for the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Immunisation Agenda 2030 and Global Action on Patient Safety.

In its intervention on the [COVID-19 response](#), ICN highlighted its latest report on the psychological distress, abuse and mass traumatisation that nurses are experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and repeated its call for adequate reporting mechanisms to ensure data availability for health workforce monitoring. ICN encouraged Member States to establish health, education and retraining opportunity, or “HERO”, funds to support people who have lost their jobs in some sectors to retrain to join the healthcare workforce and to prioritise health education in recovery plans.

The ICN intervention on [Mental health preparedness and response for the COVID-19 pandemic](#) voiced ICN's concern about the longer-term consequences of the pandemic. ICN urged governments to place mental health at the centre of national COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery plans and called on governments to urgently scale up investment for sustainable community-based mental health services and support services.

ICN welcomed the [Immunisation Agenda 2030](#), saying that the strong involvement of nurse leaders and the nursing workforce will effectively support the planning, design, implementation, and delivery of immunization programmes at all levels. ICN stressed that prioritising actions that ensure the availability and appropriate distribution of a skilled and motivated nursing workforce will be necessary to achieve IA2030 strategic priorities and will also create resilient health systems able to respond more efficiently to outbreaks and emergencies. ICN strongly recommended including a nurse in the Partnership Council to mobilise nursing partners at country and regional levels and to support the coordination of technical support.

ICN's intervention on [Global action on patient safety](#) welcomed the global patient safety action plan and noted that the designation of World Patient Safety Day had been an important step in gaining global attention on the importance of patient safety and crucial for ICN to highlight the impact of nurses in ensuring patient safety. ICN's September report, *Protecting Nurses from COVID-19 a Top Priority*, revealed the true extent of the dangers nurses face at work including violence and abuse, unsafe staffing levels, work-related stress, and severe personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages. ICN called on to save lives and create high reliability health systems, by putting healthcare worker and patient safety centre stage in the design and delivery of healthcare services.

The WHO Executive Board, held every January, sets the agenda, and decides on the resolutions to be considered by WHO's governing body, the World Health Assembly, which usually holds its annual meeting each May.

ICN has been in official relations with WHO since its inception in 1948. This means it is one of only a few organisations that can make interventions during WHO meetings.

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Note to Editors

The **International Council of Nurses** (ICN) 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 care for all and sound health policies globally.

For more information please contact Gyorgy Madarasz, Press Officer at madarasz@icn.ch
Tel: +41 22 908 01 16

www.icn.ch