



International Council of Nurses  
The global voice of nursing

Press Information . Communiqué de presse . Comunicado de prensa

---

## **ICN supports WHO's Vaccine Equity Declaration, warning that delay to global roll out of vaccines potentially catastrophic**

**Geneva, Switzerland, 12 February 2021**– The International Council of Nurses (ICN) is calling for a global approach to COVID-19 vaccination programmes, which ignores national borders and prioritises vaccination of the most vulnerable people in societies, and the vital nursing and healthcare staff who care for them.

ICN's latest survey of National Nursing Associations from 54 countries around the world highlights a stark divide between high- and low-income countries and significant regional gaps in vaccination programmes which risks propagating the spread of new variants of the virus.

- 88% of those countries surveyed which had started vaccinating nurses are high or upper-middle income countries
- Of eight low and lower-middle income countries in Africa that were surveyed none had started vaccinating their nurses
- Many National Nursing Associations in countries where vaccinations had not yet started reported they did not have information when the roll out would begin

ICN is backing the World Health Organization's [Vaccine Equity Declaration](#), which urges countries to mobilise their resources so that access to immunisation will be determined by need, rather than wealth or geographic location. Data from a new ICN survey released today, points to a chasm between the roll out of the vaccines in low- and high-income countries, creating the threat of potential breeding grounds for new variants.

As WHO launched its International Year of Health and Care Workers, ICN President Annette Kennedy said protecting them is as important as protecting the patients they serve.

“Almost two thirds of the world's nations have not started their programmes yet. The distribution of the vaccines is as much a moral question as it is one of geography and logistics, and that is why ICN will be signing WHO's Vaccine Equity Declaration.

‘I stand shoulder to shoulder with WHO Director General Dr Tedros, who has rightly said that we will witness a moral catastrophe, abandoning millions to this disease, if the vaccines are not distributed equitably.

‘Many poorer nations do not yet have access to the vaccines. And vaccinating nurses as a priority group, most of them women, will save many lives, not least those of the nurses themselves, thousands of whom have died during this pandemic. Governments must get together and do everything they can to end this unnecessary tragedy and ensure equality of access. How the world addresses these inequalities will be an indication of the sort of future we will be living in after the pandemic has gone.’

Nurses are a vulnerable group because of their heightened exposure to the virus through their work. Since early on in the pandemic, ICN has been tracking COVID-19 infections and deaths among nurses. We now know that millions of nurses have been infected, and that more than 2,700 have lost their lives, and it is probable that the number of healthcare workers who have died is probably going to be in the tens of thousands when the final count is made. So ICN is also supporting WHO's 100-day challenge, which demands that all countries to have started their vaccination programmes by World Health Day on April 7.

ICN Chief Executive Officer Howard Catton said:

“Since the pandemic began a year ago, ICN has been drawing attention to the relentless rise of healthcare worker infections, which now run into the millions. Tragically, we can now confirm that more than 2,700 nurses have made the ultimate sacrifice, while the true number of deaths for healthcare workers is likely to be in the tens of thousands.

‘The risk remains high and imminent for healthcare workers and is why ICN is again calling for them to be prioritised globally for vaccination, to protect them, and our health systems. However, very worryingly, our National Nurses Associations on the ground are reporting that the roll out of the vaccines is slow and unequal, with a chasm opening up between high- and low-income countries, and the majority is not even at the start line.

‘Particularly concerning are the reports from our associations and other reliable sources of regional differences, with countries in Africa especially lagging behind in beginning the roll out of vaccines. Compounding these concerns is the fact that many associations say there is no information about when the roll out might start. Given the prevalence of new variants such as the one discovered in South Africa migrating, this creates a potentially catastrophic new dynamic.

‘ICN urges countries to act now to avoid the serious risk of not hitting the WHO target for the beginning of the vaccine roll out in all countries in the first 100 days of this year. The clock is ticking. And to make that roll out effective, it should be a priority to vaccinate healthcare workers in low- and middle-income countries before younger and lower risk groups in high-income countries. To make this happen requires a step change from our governments, who must come together to ensure the global health workforce is vaccinated as well as their own citizens.

‘We will only stop the pandemic as one world: the virus knows no borders, and a nation by nation approach will ultimately fail because it will leave hot spots for new variants to spread. The real race now is between the virus’s ability to mutate, and the urgent response required from our governments to act together in solidarity to defeat it, starting with the global roll out of the vaccines and the prioritisation of healthcare workers in every country.”

\* \* \*

#### **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](mailto:madarasz@icn.ch)  
Tel: +41 22 908 01 16

[www.icn.ch](http://www.icn.ch)