



International Council of Nurses
The global voice of nursing

Recovering from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19)

Mr Howard Catton

Chief Executive Officer

International Council of Nurses (NGO in Roster Consultative Status)

Your Excellency Mr Abdullah Shahid,

As a nurse and Chief Executive Officer of the International Council of Nurses, I am honoured to speak on behalf of the CoNGO member organisations on the topic of “Recovering from COVID-19”.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a huge toll on the physical and mental health of healthcare workers around the world, causing the deaths of more than 180,000 health workers and the infection of millions of others as they continued to care for people often with inadequate PPE. A recent ICN report also shows alarming high levels of stress and burnout in nurses across the globe. ICN believes that the current greatest threat to global health is workforce shortages. With a global shortage of six million nurses and 18 million healthcare workers before the pandemic, we are now seeing increased turnover and quit rates which are highly likely to increase these numbers. This matters because there is no healthcare without a healthcare workforce: 66% of WHO Member States have reported that health workforce-related factors are the most common causes of service disruptions.ⁱ The applause and accolades for healthcare workers during the pandemic must now be matched by real investment.

During the pandemic, our nurses and healthcare workers stepped into the shoes of families unable to physically be with their loved ones during their darkest and final hours. However, in many parts of the world, these same healthcare workers were subject to abuse and harassment. In current conflict zones, we are witnessing an abhorrent increase in deliberate attacks on healthcare workers and facilities. The safety and human rights of healthcare workers require resolute global protection.

The pandemic also starkly highlighted the world’s lack of preparedness and ruthlessly exacerbated existing inequalities in our society: access to vaccines, the disproportionate impacts on women, ethnic minorities and those in lower social economic groups. In response to their own nursing shortages, high-income countries are now turning to the quick fix of international recruitment from low-income countries which worryingly points to a move to nationalism. Yet there is no one nation solution to any of the global health challenges that we face; we must work together and include health in all policies.

The pandemic powerfully demonstrated that our health and our economic welfare are inextricably linked. Spending on healthcare is not a cost, but a cast-iron investment that brings huge returns. If we do not make the investments to grow and strengthen our global health workforce, we will continue to struggle economically, and access to high-quality healthcare for all will remain nothing but a pipe dream.

The pandemic has shown us the true value of our healthcare workers. Now is the time for the world to act in solidarity to support them by monitoring and enforcing safety and protection at work; investing in healthcare workers’ education, jobs and leadership; and recognising that good health is a prerequisite to the stability and cohesion of societies and the bedrock of our global safety and security. Health and peace are inseparable.

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In the next decade, it is the strength of our health systems that will determine the health of people, the health of our economies and the safety and security of societies. Our global health workforce are both health and peace makers; their work is an expression of our humanity in practice.

Thank you.

ⁱ WHO (2021) Second round of the national pulse survey on continuity of essential health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Geneva: WHO, 2021
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-EHS-continuity-survey-2021.1>