



The Rt Honourable Steve Barclay  
Secretary of State for Health and  
Social Care  
Department of Health and Social Care  
39 Victoria Street  
London SW1H 0EU  
United Kingdom

14 December 2022

Dear Mr Barclay,

I am writing to you today on behalf of the International Council of Nurses, a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations, representing the 28 million nurses worldwide, in support of the Royal College of Nursing whom we are proud to call our members.

ICN is the world's first and widest reaching international organisation for health professionals. We have had special relations with the World Health Organization since 1948 and continue to work closely with WHO on nursing and health policy issues. I was honoured to be a co-chair of the world's first [State of the World's Nursing report](#) which was published in 2020, the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife. This report highlighted the global shortage of six million nurses prior to pandemic. More recently, ICN reported in our paper [Sustain and Retain in 2022 and Beyond](#) that because of the impact of the pandemic that number could be up to 13 million nurses that need replacing in the next few years!

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that we need to be better prepared for future pandemics. It has set us back on the road to Universal Health Coverage. We also know we have issues around noncommunicable diseases, ageing and antimicrobial resistance. For all of those reasons, ICN and WHO have been crystal clear that we need to invest in the nursing workforce.

ICN has worked with WHO to develop the current [Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery 2021-2025](#) which was adopted by the World Health Assembly in 2021. The top line message of this report is the need for investment in nursing leadership, education, jobs and service delivery.

ICN has been concerned for number of years about the historic undervaluing of nursing roles in terms of pay which does not reflect the complexity and demands of modern nursing practice. Nurses today are educated to degree level. They are problems solvers, leaders and scientists. Nurses are at the forefront of advancing innovations to improve access to care and creating new models of care. They are a safety critical profession and decades of overwhelming evidence shows that having the right number of experienced and educated nurses leads to better patient outcomes, shorter lengths of hospital stays, lower readmission rates and, most importantly, reduced mortality rates. Nurses are a major part of the solution to meeting the new challenges that the world faces today.

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3, place Jean-Marteau, 1201 Geneva - Switzerland - Tel.: +41 22 908 01 00  
Fax: +41 22 908 01 01 - e-mail: [icn@icn.ch](mailto:icn@icn.ch) - web: [www.icn.ch](http://www.icn.ch)

We are also very concerned that the undervaluing of the nursing profession in economic terms is driven by the fact that the majority of nurses are women. Therefore, by investing in nursing, we not only strengthen health systems, but we also addresses gender equality and equity.

Pay is, without a doubt, an absolutely critical factor in the retention and recruitment of nurses. ICN's work has shown that, during the global economic downturn, nurses pay around the world stagnated and, now, as we come out of the pandemic, but face the challenge of war in Ukraine and economies struggling, nurses' pay is falling again in real terms. This is an historically long-term pattern of fall in pay, which not only is making the nursing profession unattractive for people starting careers, but we are also seeing increased quit rates and vacancy rates around the world with people leaving the profession early, leading to a challenge in retention. Increasing pay will help to address recruitment and retention issues and also help reduce England's reliance on the overseas recruitment of nurses which risks weakening already fragile health systems and widening global inequalities.

We hear governments say that they can't afford to invest in nursing, but ICN has consistently replied that the world cannot afford not to invest in nursing. Why? Because nurses are the bedrock of strengthening your health systems, of keeping people well and healthy, and having a productive population who can work. There can be no health security without nurses. The road to economic growth is paved by investment in health.

The report of the United Nation's Commission for Health Employment and Economic Growth showed that new investment in global health workforce will create jobs and drive economic growth. It stated that "Investments in the health system also have multiplier effects that enhance inclusive economic growth, including via the creation of decent jobs."

A recent [World Economic Forum article](#) by Hans Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe and Professor Mario Monti, Head of the Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development, stated "The past three years taught us a fundamental lesson. If we fail to invest in preparing our health systems for unexpected shocks, in this case, a pandemic, but also financial crises or natural disasters, we will pay more in the long run." and "Given that healthcare will always be labour intensive, even if we can harness new technology, we must invest in the health workforce, with measures that attract and retain these essential workers."

ICN policy supports strike action by nurses around the world. We do see it as a last resort, but it is a right. However, we also encourage - in the strongest possible way- all parties to come together to meaningfully negotiate on pay and working conditions to find a solution. When you invest in nursing, you are investing in the health security and economic prosperity of the people of the UK.

Yours sincerely,



Howard Catton  
Chief Executive Officer  
International Council of nurses