

**Copy of the letter sent to the
candidates for the post of WHO
Director-General**

15 October 2026

Dear WHO Director-General Candidate,

As the global voice of the world's 29.8 million nurses, the International Council of Nurses (ICN) is writing to all candidates for Director-General of the World Health Organization to request your commitment to strengthening nursing within WHO and across global health and to set out four priority actions to achieve this. We will share the responses we receive with the global nursing community.

Nurses are the single largest health profession, comprising around 57% of the world's health workers, and the backbone of health systems worldwide – the first, and often only, health professional many people ever meet. Nurses work across the whole life course and in every setting: primary care, hospitals, homes, schools, communities, long-term and palliative care, public health and humanitarian response. They are central to delivering the objectives of WHO's Fourteenth General Programme of Work and overall mandate, with leading roles in advancing universal health coverage, primary and preventive health care, holistic care and continuity of care, pandemic preparedness, emergency response, mental health care, healthy ageing, immunization, climate-resilient health systems, and global health security. Nursing leadership is critical to redesigning health systems towards primary, people-centred, preventive, community-based and integrated care. Nurses bring unique expertise, distinct from other health professionals, that must be used to inform the design as well as the implementation of health policy.

Current challenges and opportunities for WHO

Despite the size and contribution of the profession, the world is still facing a severe shortage, with a shortfall of 5.8 million nurses in 2023 and growing inequalities in workforce availability and distribution across regions. Underutilization of nurses' full scope of practice and leadership capabilities also persists. Without decisive action on nurse education, employment, retention, regulation and leadership, these gaps will

continue to undermine health-system resilience and access to care at a time of significant and rising global health challenges and needs.

A strong nursing function at WHO is fundamental to ensuring that WHO's policies and country support reflect workforce realities, address shortages and the root causes that drive them, and strengthen nursing capacity.

ICN recognizes and values the progress made under Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, including the establishment of the Office of the Chief Nurse in 2017. This strengthened the visibility, influence and convening power of nursing within WHO. It also sent a powerful message to Member States about the importance of the nursing voice and leadership at the highest levels of health policy and decision-making.

However, the next Director-General must now secure that progress and take it further. Recent structural changes, including the relocation of the Office of the Chief Nurse and Health Workforce department to the WHO Academy in Lyon, have raised concerns in the global nursing community about ensuring that WHO's nursing leadership retains the authority, resources and access to decision-making needed to influence policy across the Organization. A strong Chief Nurse function cannot be limited to education, workforce programming or professional advocacy. Nursing expertise must inform WHO's entire policy agenda, including health systems, primary health care, emergencies, disease prevention, service delivery, regulation, safe staffing and the programme budget. This requires a permanent, senior and adequately resourced Chief Nurse function with a consolidated technical mandate and a strong executive presence at WHO Headquarters in Geneva, ensuring direct participation in executive deliberations and decisions. It also requires senior nursing leadership in WHO Regional Offices and formal advisory mechanisms through which WHO can draw systematically on nursing expertise from governments, WHO Collaborating Centres, ICN and other relevant partners. Significant nursing expertise already exists across these networks, and coordinating this expertise would provide WHO with an efficient and cost-effective way to expand its expert capacity, strengthen the relevance of its policies and guidance, and increase professional and national ownership of policy implementation.

Member States have already provided a clear mandate for strengthening nursing, adopting the Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery (SDNMs) and voting to extend them until 2030, with commitments to strengthen nursing leadership, education, jobs, and service delivery. At the 78th World Health Assembly, several Member States made strong calls not only to extend the SDNMs but to accelerate their implementation. The decision also requires the Director-General to report to the World

Health Assembly on progress in implementation, integrated with reporting on the Global Strategy on Human Resources for Health: Workforce 2030. This places a clear responsibility on WHO's next leadership to demonstrate progress towards the 2030 objectives.

Proposed priorities for stronger nursing leadership at WHO

We would therefore welcome a clear statement of your commitment to prioritizing nursing as part of your mandate as Director-General.

We also invite you to indicate whether you would support the following four actions, or how you would propose to achieve their objectives:

1. Ensure a permanent, senior and fully resourced WHO Chief Nurse function

Ensure a Chief Nurse at Director level, with a Geneva-based executive presence, a cross-organizational technical and policy mandate with the authority to influence decisions across WHO, direct access to senior leadership, and a dedicated office with its own staff and core budget.

2. Establish senior nursing leadership in every WHO Regional Office

Ensure that each Regional Office has a senior nursing and midwifery lead with the authority to influence regional strategy and country support, connected professionally to the WHO Chief Nurse and to Member State chief nursing and midwifery officers.

3. Create a standing global nursing advisory mechanism

Provide the Chief Nurse and Director-General with a standing mechanism for coordinated expert advice, drawing on the substantial nursing expertise within WHO Regional Offices, government chief nursing and midwifery officers, WHO Collaborating Centres, ICN and other relevant partners. Existing mechanisms, including the Global Forum for Government Chief Nursing and Midwifery Officers and the Global Partners Meeting, should be used as part of this coordinated approach.

4. Maintain a strategic and fully resourced WHO health workforce function

Ensure that WHO has a strong and adequately resourced function dedicated to the health workforce as a whole, capable of leading and supporting global workforce strategies and providing authoritative advice to Member States on workforce planning.

There is no health without a strong health workforce. Given the urgency of global health challenges as well as the global shortage of nurses and other health workers, it is vital that WHO's health workforce function is fully supported to develop and

implement workforce strategies, alongside guidance and standards on education, retention, migration and mobility. Its work must extend beyond the provision of training and include a strong strategic, advisory, standard-setting and monitoring role, including tracking global and national workforce trends, identifying risks and gaps, and supporting Member States to develop sustainable workforce policies and plans.

To reflect the centrality of health workers across WHO's mandate and signal this broader strategic role, we propose renaming the Academy the WHO Health and Care Workforce Academy. This would make clear that its purpose extends beyond training to strengthening the workforce that delivers health and care.

We believe that these proposals are much-needed practical measures to strengthen WHO's effectiveness and ensure that its policies are informed by the health professionals who deliver and coordinate care across every setting, throughout people's lives.

We invite you to set out your overall commitment to strengthening nursing within WHO and across global health and the steps you would take during your first term to translate your commitment into action. Please respond to each of the four proposed actions, indicating your support or the alternative or additional mechanisms you would pursue to achieve these objectives.

Strengthening nursing leadership within WHO will help ensure that the Organization—and the next Director-General—can deliver for every country, every health system and every population.

Building on our official relations with WHO since 1948, ICN stands ready to work closely with you, bringing nursing evidence, expertise and experience to strengthen the health workforce and advance Health for All.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. José Luis Cobos Serrano
President
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Howard Catton
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