



## **The critical role of nurses in safe maternal and newborn care**

### **World Patient Safety Day Joint Statement**

#### **International Council of Nurses and The Council of International Neonatal Nurses, Inc.**

To mark World Patient Safety Day, 17 September 2021, the International Council of Nurses (ICN) and the Council of International Neonatal Nurses, Inc. (COINN) urge all stakeholders to heed the campaign call and “Act now for safe and respectful childbirth!”.

Women and newborns are at significant risk of exposure to unsafe care. Globally, maternal and newborn mortality from preventable causes remains high, particularly in low-resource settings. Highly skilled nurses working in supportive environments are key to ensuring the delivery of safe, high-quality care and to preventing avoidable risks and harm. Nurses play an integral role in providing and advocating for best practices for safe and effective care that meet the health, emotional and social needs of the newborn, mother and family. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these practices have been compromised – for example, many institutions separated mothers from their babies irrespective of whether babies were healthy or small and sick.

Nurses are the first line of defense for the maternal/infant dyad and are the health professionals that spend the most time with families. Yet in many low-resource settings, nurses who care for the small and sick newborn and their mother, who may have complications, often lack appropriate education and training and adequate resources to deliver safe care. Nurses are often assigned to clinical areas without regard to their expertise. A lack of safe staffing in many settings puts mothers, newborns and nurses at risk for unsafe care. Often, the number of nurses, especially in neonatal intensive care units, is based on time of day rather than on the number of newborns present or their acuity levels. Safe and supportive working environments for nurses must be a priority for patient safety.

Persistent gender inequities also negatively impact the quality and safety of maternal and newborn healthcare. With the majority of nurses being women, gender discrimination can constrain nurses’ decision-making and leadership abilities and negatively impact the perceived role of the nurse. Ensuring nurses are integral in interprofessional healthcare teams will advance quality and safety by fostering a safe work environment built on mutual respect and shared decision-making.

Working in both policy and practice, nurses can bring evidence-informed solutions to policy decisions and must be central to the development of policies and strategies at all levels.

ICN and COINN call on all stakeholders to take sustainable actions that support the nursing workforce to deliver safe and respectful care, and to reduce avoidable harm to mothers and newborns.

In particular, the following actions should be prioritized:

- Develop standardized orientation and training for nurses to care for mothers and, anticipating complications, that include care for the small and sick newborn
- Develop, implement and evaluate safe staffing systems and processes that account for not only the number of mother/baby dyads or small and sick newborns but their acuity level and the skill mix of healthcare workers
- Address underlying causes of gender inequity and tackle gender bias and power imbalances which undermine the nursing voice and participation in decision-making
- Develop leadership capacity to eliminate avoidable harm in health care
- Call for zero separation of mothers and their newborns
- Recognise families as recipients of care and empower them to be active participants and partners in care.

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**ICN • CIE • CII**

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