



## Patient safety

Patient harm from unsafe care is one of the leading causes of death and disability globally and a growing public health challenge. It is estimated that 1 in 10 patients are subject to an adverse event while receiving care in high-income countries and 1 in 4 in low- and middle-income countries, leading to an estimated 2.6 million deaths a year.<sup>1,2</sup> Harm, including injury or death, occurs through unsafe care such as medication errors, healthcare-associated infections, unsafe surgical care procedures, unsafe injection practices, patient identification errors, a lack of referral systems, diagnostic errors, unsafe transfusion practices, radiation errors, sepsis, and blood clots.<sup>3</sup>

Ideally, the goal would be zero harm. However, some harm cannot be avoided. Fortunately, patient safety incidents are largely avoidable, and a focus on avoidable or preventable harm and its nature allows for more effective patient safety strategies to be developed. Key sources of patient safety incidents include actions of healthcare professionals, healthcare system failures, or a combination of errors made by individuals, system failures, and patient characteristics.<sup>4</sup> A high number of incidents occur because of the design or operation of clinical processes, for example, miscommunication between healthcare providers leading to incorrect testing and misdiagnosis. In low- and middle-income settings, patient harm may be related to a lack of bare minimum resources, such as no running water or inadequate medication storage. Patient safety incidents occur equally in primary and ambulatory care as they do in hospital settings.<sup>5</sup> However, research shows that certain sources of preventable harm in primary-care settings and in mental-health care may go unnoticed or untargeted by patient safety improvements.<sup>4</sup>

The burden of harm can be reduced by developing and implementing patient safety strategies at all levels of the health system based on established and aligned patient safety principles. The concept of patient safety is defined as a “framework of organized activities that creates cultures, processes, procedures, behaviours, technologies, and environments in health care that consistently and sustainably lower risks, reduce the occurrence of avoidable harm, make errors less likely and reduce the impact of harm when it does occur”.<sup>3</sup> The adoption of the World Health Assembly resolution “Global action on patient safety” in 2019 marked a milestone in



which global efforts have begun prioritizing patient safety as a cornerstone to building effective, efficient, people-centered healthcare systems that deliver high-quality, respectful care.<sup>6</sup> Patient safety is also recognized as an essential component to achieving universal health coverage. Concurrently, to achieve zero avoidable harm, all of the other building blocks for health system strengthening must be acted on. This includes increasing investment in health, strengthening emergency preparedness, building the health workforce, integrating digital health and improving leadership and governance.

Through the International Council of Nurses' (ICN) participation in the WHO Global Patient Safety Expert Working Group, safe staffing and health workforce safety are priority areas for patient safety. Healthcare worker safety and patient safety are inextricably linked. Violence and abuse, burnout, stress, moral injury, physical illness and stigma experienced by nurses are associated with worsening safety and quality of care.<sup>7,8</sup> Creating safe working environments and protecting the mental health of nurses and health workers have extensive positive outcomes, including preventing patient harm, and are essential to delivering quality care.<sup>9</sup> The 2019 WHO "Global action on patient safety" also recognizes the importance of building and maintaining a competent, compassionate, and committed healthcare workforce operating within a supportive environment to make healthcare safe. ICN is a signatory of the 2020 Charter "Health worker safety: a priority for patient safety" that calls on governments and local health service leaders to take action to better protect health.

Research continues to highlight that safe nurse staffing is an essential component to patient safety and delivery of high-quality care and positive patient outcomes.<sup>10</sup> Having an optimal number of Registered Nurses available across the care continuum save lives, reduces costs, and improves systems outcomes. Substantial evidence demonstrates the impact of nurse staffing on reducing adverse events such as the incidence of pressure ulcers, infections, malnutrition and medication errors.

Nurses are active participants in preventing patient harm—a key element of the nurse's role is to advance patient safety and reduce risks across the continuum of care. As is espoused in the ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses, "nurses facilitate a culture of safety in health care environments, recognizing and addressing threats to people and safe care in health practices, services, and settings".<sup>11</sup> As nursing care spans all

areas of care delivery, nurses are well suited to anticipate near misses, prevent harm and improve the quality of healthcare delivered across the healthcare systems and populations.

Developing a blame-free or “just culture” and a culture of safety are core elements to improving patient safety. Safety culture is an integrated pattern of individual and organizational actions and behaviours based on shared beliefs and values that support individuals and organizations to minimize patient harm.<sup>12</sup> Engaged and committed leadership and healthcare workforce and human resource and performance management systems are critical to achieving a just culture. The attitudes, beliefs, values and skills upheld by ethical nursing practice and professional nursing standards such as transparency of information, engagement of patients and families and reflective practice naturally contribute to positive safety cultures. As nurses make up the majority of the health workforce, their commitment to a culture of safety and role as change agents is critical to creating and upholding this culture. To support nurses in this, employers must ensure that mechanisms are in place to raise concerns in a safe and timely manner and commit to responding to and addressing concerns.

The nursing profession has been an important voice for collaborative decision-making and needs to be a full partner in all patient safety strategies. The Global Patient Safety Action Plan 2021–2030 envisions a world in which no one is harmed in healthcare, every patient receives safe and respectful care every time everywhere and nurses will support the achievement of eliminating all avoidable harm in healthcare by substantially contributing to strategies under all seven objectives of the Action Plan<sup>5</sup>:

1. Make zero avoidable harm to patients a state of mind and a rule of engagement in the planning and delivery of healthcare everywhere.
2. Build high-reliability health systems (organizations that maintain exceptionally safe operations despite hazardous conditions) and health organizations that protect patients daily from harm.
3. Assure the safety of every clinical process.
4. Engage and empower patients and families to help and support the journey to safer healthcare.



5. Inspire, educate, skill, and protect health workers to contribute to the design and delivery of safe care systems.
6. Ensure a constant flow of information and knowledge to drive the mitigation of risk, a reduction in levels of avoidable harm, and improvements in the safety of care.
7. Develop and sustain multisectoral and multinational synergy, partnership, and solidarity to improve patient safety and quality of care.

## **ICN Position and Recommendations**

### **As the global voice of nursing, ICN:**

- Calls on governments to substantially increase investment and recruitment, development and training and retention of the health workforce, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, as a critical action to reduce patient harm and advance patient safety.
- Believes that supported and engaged nursing leadership at all levels is essential to improve patient safety.
- Believes that it is critical that nurses understand the importance of risk mechanisms that lead to unsafe care and how they are investigated, patient safety science and actions to minimize risk and harm.
- Calls on governments to be accountable for delivering needs-based safe nurse staffing by ensuring sufficient funding and establishing legislation and effective human resource planning to ensure an adequate supply of health workers to meet patient and population needs.
- Asserts that organizations should have a nurse at the executive level to ensure the delivery of safe, high-quality ethical care.
- Asserts that nurse administrators must be central to and involved in the design and planning of patient safety programs and activities.
- Calls on governments to sign the Health Worker Safety Charter and take urgent and sustainable action through its key measures.



- Believes that patient safety and health workforce safety are inextricably linked and that workforce safety must be integrated and aligned with patient safety strategies and policies.
- Strongly supports a blame-free patient safety culture with open and transparent response and learning systems.
- Believes that patients and families should be actively involved in the development of relevant patient safety policies and strategies.
- Collaborates with national nurses' associations and academic institutions to provide competency-based education on patient safety.
- Encourages interprofessional teamwork to advance quality and safety by fostering a safe work environment built on mutual respect and shared decision-making.

**ICN encourages national nurses' associations (NNAs), in collaboration with their respective governments, to:**

- Contribute to the development of patient safety legislation and ensure its delivery and maintenance.
- Advocate for nurses to be key members of clinical leadership groups that plan, develop and implement national patient safety improvement priorities.
- Advocate for the use of incident reporting systems at all health facilities and for policies and processes that support nurses to report patient safety without detriment or fear of retribution and that support and promote a culture of safety.
- Ensure that standards for undergraduate and postgraduate nursing education curricula include patient safety with an interprofessional team-based approach.
- Collaborate with national patient safety organizations to foster partnerships in patient safety for mutual learning and sharing of best practices.
- Support patient and family engagement and empowerment in patient safety, including program and service design and delivery, monitoring and evaluation, policy and priority setting and governance.



- Support nurses to participate in establishing, synergizing, and scaling-up patient safety surveillance systems to contribute to information and knowledge around sources of avoidable harm and to improve processes. This includes ensuring incident reporting systems provide opportunities for front-line nurses and leadership to learn from incidents and near misses.
- Ensure that patient safety core competencies are part of nursing regulatory standards.
- Advocate for national policies that promote functional multidisciplinary teams, investment in interprofessional learning and governance and funding models that support team-based care.
- Leverage the policy priorities of the World Health Organization Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery to advance patient safety.
- Mark World Patient Safety Day annually on September 17 to raise public awareness of the importance of patient safety for the health of people and in health systems and to highlight the role of nurses in ensuring patient safety.

**ICN calls on individual nurses in their roles as clinicians, educators, researchers, policy influencers or executives to:**

- Contribute to establishing, maintaining and continuously improving a patient safety culture and enacting patient safety principles in daily practice.
- Empower individuals, families and communities to engage in patient safety.
- As nurse leaders, prepare and support nurses with the skills to become strong and passionate patient-safety leaders and to collaborate in redesigning health systems that are oriented around patient safety.
- Take appropriate actions to safeguard individuals, families, communities and populations when a co-worker, any other person, policy, practice or misuse of technology endangers their health.
- Plan, anticipate and monitor patient safety incidents and respond in a timely manner with empathy and compassion to meet urgent clinical, emotional and information needs and provide follow-up as required, promoting ethical conduct and ensuring a just culture when errors or near misses occur.



- Advocate for and participate in the establishment, strengthening and use of patient safety incident reporting and learning systems that are transparent, confidential, user-friendly and effective and that prioritize the investigation of incidents, lesson-learning and improvement activities.
- Contribute to patient-safety research and quality-improvement initiatives, ensuring individuals, families and communities are active partners.
- Develop, support and participate in in-service patient safety educational opportunities.

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