



THE SEVENTY-THIRD SESSION OF WHO REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Provisional agenda item 8.1: Decade for health workforce strengthening in SEA Region 2015–2024: mid-term review of progress, challenges, capacities and opportunities.

September 2020

2020 is the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife and was to be a celebration of the contributions of nurses to the health of the global population. Sadly, this celebration is on hold as nurses around the world work tirelessly to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, risking, and sometimes losing, their lives. The pandemic has underscored that nurses are the backbone of health systems and are essential to protecting and improving health and wellbeing. This dedication must not be in vain – efforts to support the nursing workforce must be increased. The first ever State of the World's Nursing report published this year has provided the evidence and ICN urges governments to implement the recommendations and invest in nursing education, jobs and leadership.

The number of COVID-19 infections and deaths in healthcare workers (HCWs) is a global emergency. ICN is collecting data on these numbers and estimates that 8% of all cases are among HCWs, and the WHO believes it could be up to 10%, which is over two million cases and rising. Unfortunately, many countries are not collecting data which has immediate and serious negative implications. Data is crucial to improving infection control measures and saving the lives of nurses and patients. Furthermore, it will allow for meaningful international comparisons to help understand the wide variation of infection rates between countries. As such, ICN repeats the urgent call to Member States to immediately collect systematic and standardised data on HCW infections and deaths, supported by clear reporting and monitoring mechanisms. With the significant acceleration of cases currently reported in the Region, we must act now.

Nurses and other HCWs must also be prioritised to receive a vaccine against COVID-19, once available. Governments have a duty to protect nurses from unnecessary risks to their health and safety while carrying out their work. This is both a human and worker right and will allow nurses to continue to meet the health needs of populations. Prioritising the vaccination of nurses will also protect patients and help to safeguard the healthcare system nurses work in, which are under immense strain across the Region and the world.

Strengthening the nursing workforce is essential to achieve UHC, one of the Region's Flagship Priorities. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of strong primary health care (PHC) systems for health system resilience. Nurses, sometimes the only healthcare professional in communities, increase healthcare access and are central to developing and delivering PHC models. However, to fully leverage this requires nursing leadership in policy making at all levels. The State of the World's Nursing report shows that only four countries in the Region have a Government Chief Nursing Officer (GCNO). ICN calls on all countries to establish a GCNO position within appropriate units of Government Ministries of Health, with sufficient resourcing and senior level decision-making responsibilities and authority. ICN also calls on the WHO to establish a GCNO position in each WHO Region.

The South-East Asia Region needs 1.9 million more nurses and midwives by 2030 and that number will continue to rise unless political commitment is made to support and invest in the nursing workforce.