
Development of a draft global patient safety action plan

INTRODUCTION

1. Patient safety is a fundamental principle of health care. However, many medical practices and risks associated with health care are emerging as major challenges for patient safety globally and contribute significantly to the burden of harm due to unsafe care. Available evidence suggests hospitalizations in low- and middle-income countries lead annually to 134 million adverse events, contributing to 2.6 million deaths.¹ Estimates indicate that in high-income countries, about 1 in 10 patients is harmed while receiving hospital care.²

2. The current pandemic of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has further exposed the vulnerability of health systems, irrespective of resource settings, in terms of coping with increased demand while ensuring the safety of services delivered. Patient safety issues such as personal protection, health worker safety, medication safety and patient engagement are at the core of the COVID-19 response globally. Patient safety interventions must be urgently implemented in order to respond effectively to this global public health emergency of unprecedented scale. Such interventions are also needed to improve preparedness to respond to such challenges in the future.

3. All Member States and international development agencies are striving to achieve universal health coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals. Patient safety is at the heart of the operational and conceptual framework of universal health coverage. Extending access to health care must mean extending access to safe health care. Adverse events can pose a major access barrier to individuals in need of care by diminishing their trust in the health care system. Prolonged hospital stays, repeat procedures and litigations can lead to wastage of scarce financial resources that could otherwise be used for expanding the benefits of universal health coverage.

4. Recognizing that improving and ensuring patient safety is a growing challenge to health service delivery globally and that unsafe health care causes a significant level of avoidable patient harm and human suffering, and also recognizing that improving and ensuring patient safety calls for addressing the gaps in knowledge, policy, design, delivery and communication at all levels, the Seventy-second World Health Assembly in 2019 adopted resolution WHA72.6 on global action on patient safety.³ It

¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Crossing the global quality chasm: improving health care worldwide. Washington (DC): The National Academies Press; 2018 (<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25152/crossing-the-global-quality-chasm-improving-health-care-worldwide>, accessed 10 July 2020).

² Slawomirski L, Auraen A, Klazinga N. The economics of patient safety: strengthening a value-based approach to reducing patient harm at national level. Paris: OECD; 2017 (<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/5a9858cd-en.pdf?expires=1593688230&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=B1730733897FC2DC01D171C38D4218F2> , accessed 10 July 2020).

³ Resolution WHA72.6 (https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA72-REC1/A72_2019_REC1-en.pdf#page=41, accessed 23 July 2020).

urged Member States – and, where applicable, regional economic integration organizations – inter alia, to recognize patient safety as a health priority in health sector policies and programmes.

5. The Health Assembly also requested the Director-General, inter alia, to formulate a global patient safety action plan in consultation with Member States and all relevant stakeholders, including in the private sector, for submission to the Seventy-fourth World Health Assembly in 2021 through the Executive Board at its 148th session.

6. In response, the Secretariat has initiated the development of a draft global patient safety action plan. The action plan aims to provide Member States and other stakeholders with an action-oriented framework to facilitate the implementation of strategic patient safety interventions at all levels of health systems globally over the next 10 years (2021–2030).

FORMULATING A DRAFT GLOBAL PATIENT SAFETY ACTION PLAN

7. A WHO global expert consultation on formulating a draft action plan was held in Geneva from 24 to 26 February 2020, to discuss the proposed scope and strategic direction of the draft action plan. More than 120 experts – representing 44 Member States, international organizations, patient associations and intergovernmental organizations – participated in the consultation and provided consensus recommendations on 12 patient safety thematic action areas. To develop the draft action plan further, a drafting and review task force has been constituted, in which key experts participate. A first draft of the action plan will be posted on the WHO website, for further consultation with Member States and the public.¹

8. The draft action plan will provide strategic direction for all stakeholders in improving patient safety in their practice domain through policy actions as well as implementation of recommendations at the point of care. The draft action plan will provide a list of suggested actions for governments, civil society, international organizations, intergovernmental organizations, the Secretariat and, most importantly, for health care facilities. These actions have been grouped under the following seven strategic objectives.

- (a) Make zero-avoidable harm to patients a state of mind and a rule of engagement in the planning and delivery of health care everywhere.
- (b) Build high-reliability health systems and health organizations that protect patients daily from harm.
- (c) Assure the safety of every clinical process.
- (d) Engage and empower patients and families to help and support the journey to safer health care.
- (e) Inspire, educate and skill every health professional to deliver safe care.
- (f) Ensure a constant flow of information and knowledge to drive mitigation of risk, a reduction in levels of avoidable harm and improvement in the safety of care.

¹ At <https://www.who.int/patientsafety/en/>.

(g) Develop and sustain multisectoral and multinational synergy, solidarity and partnership to improve patient safety.

9. The draft action plan will also provide a normative framework for countries to develop their respective national action plans on patient safety, as well to align existing strategic instruments to promote patient safety in all clinical and health-related programmes. In addition, the draft action plan will provide a framework to measure the progress made in meeting patient safety targets. Although global voluntary targets are included in the action plan, countries will be able set their own targets, based on the baseline performance, capacity and priorities.

10. A precondition for successfully accelerating efforts to reduce unintended harm during health care is that all stakeholders make concerted efforts and collaborate. Hence, the draft action plan also makes the case for a unified multisectoral response in which all national and international partners, as well as patient groups, work together with Member States by fostering partnerships and investing resources necessary for accelerating global action on patient safety.

ACTION BY THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE

11. The Regional Committee is invited to comment and provide input on the draft global patient safety action plan (2021–2030).

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