

A Statement by the International Council of Nurses on COVID-19 Vaccination



Nurses lead the way

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As the global voice of nursing and representing the over 27 million nurses of the world, the International Council of Nurses (ICN):

Firmly believes in the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccination, which is supported by science and evidence, and recognises the efforts of the scientific community to maintain constant vigilance in monitoring safety and efficacy of vaccines.

Promotes the nursing role as central to enhancing public trust and increasing uptake in COVID-19 vaccination.

Acknowledges that nurses are trusted and can be powerful role models and, as such, have a professional responsibility to follow public health measures, including getting vaccinated¹, to protect themselves, the public and health systems.

Urges governments to take immediate, collective and sustained action to ensure equitable global vaccine access for people in all countries, including vaccine sharing and financing and support for scale-up of manufacturing, distribution and delivery of vaccines.

Calls for the prioritisation of vaccines for the most at-risk groups including nurses, other healthcare workers and vulnerable populations.

Firmly upholds that vaccine access should be irrespective of colour, creed, culture, disability or illness, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, indigeneity, politics, race or social status.

Strongly condemns acts of verbal or physical abuse and violence, actual or threatened, perpetrated by anyone against any person including nurses, other healthcare workers, patients, family members, and members of the public in the support of vaccination efforts.

Calls on governments to ensure better protection and working conditions for healthcare workers in the pandemic and vaccination response, supported by national legislation.

1 Unless medically contraindicated

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 virus a global pandemic. At an unprecedented speed, safe and effective vaccines against the virus were developed, approved, manufactured, and deployed.

Immunisation is one of the most effective tools for protecting the health of people and communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the death of millions of people and has affected the lives of billions

VACCINE ACCESS EQUITY

ICN has been advocating for vaccine equity and prioritisation of vulnerable populations, nurses and healthcare workers for over a year and is deeply concerned by the gross inequities globally in COVID-19 vaccine access which is causing high infection and death rates and will have a profound long-term impact on global public health and socio-economic development. Vaccine inequity currently represents the greatest impediment to ending the pandemic.¹ The WHO goal of having at least 40% of people in every country vaccinated by the end of 2021 was unfortunately not met. However, the WHO has declared that if 70% of people in every country are vaccinated by mid-2022 the acute phase of the pandemic could end. Unless world leaders commit to ensuring equitable vaccine access, ICN is deeply concerned that this target is at risk of not being met. The discrepancy between the percentage of people vaccinated in high-income countries compared to those in low-income countries is staggering. Current statistics on global vaccine equity can be found [here](#). Furthermore, millions of healthcare workers and

NURSES' ROLE

The nursing workforce has been at the forefront of COVID-19 vaccination. Nurses are the main clinical providers of COVID-19 vaccination including planning, management, and implementation of vaccination strategies and the actual administration of vaccines to billions of individuals. Nurses are driving forward primary health care and are finding innovative ways to integrate people-centred immunization structures. Nursing care is often the only health service that reaches the most geographically, culturally and socially isolated and marginalized populations.

As valued and respected members of the healthcare team, nurses engage in ethical nursing practice to promote health, prevent illness, restore health, alleviate suffering and promote a dignified death. The

in every corner of the world. Vaccination against COVID-19 has proven to reduce the likelihood of serious illness or death and mass vaccination of the world's population in combination with other public health measures is considered the most effective strategy to managing and ending the pandemic. Protecting populations most at-risk of being infected with COVID-19 and/or more severe disease or outcomes is central to this strategy.

other most at-risk populations have not received the vaccine.

Vaccine inequity is disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable populations and will further widen the gap between the rich and the poor, undermining decades of human development achievements. ICN believes that vaccine equity is a fundamental issue of morality, ethics and human rights and should be non-negotiable. Access to, allocation of, and resources to deliver COVID-19 vaccines should be equal across all countries and not based on economic status. To ensure this, there is a need for global mechanisms that empower and strengthen local and regional manufacturing capacity and address barriers to distribution of vaccines, including patent waivers and other tools and technologies.

In addition to the moral imperative, ensuring everyone everywhere gets the vaccine is an important public health measure to prevent the emergence and spread of virus variants and the continued spread of the COVID-19 virus.

ICN Code of Ethics contains several ethical duties and values that are applicable to nurses' professional responsibility as it relates to vaccination.² Nurses provide evidence-informed, person-centered care and ensure that people and their families receive understandable, accurate, sufficient, and timely information. Nurses actively promote patient safety, address threats to people and have a professional responsibility to follow public health measures to keep the public safe. The nursing profession responds to emergencies, epidemics and pandemics, and shares the responsibility for the safety of those who receive care.

One of the barriers to high vaccine acceptance and uptake is a lack of public trust in vaccines and in the

COVID-19 vaccine in particular. Misinformation and disinformation are contributing to vaccine hesitancy and refusal. Nurses play a central role in creating and maintaining confidence in vaccination because of their closeness to patients and as one of the most trusted healthcare professionals in the health workforce. Nurses communicate accurate and timely information on the benefits and safety of vaccines and in meaningful ways that are tailored to the needs of patients, families, communities, colleagues and the general public. Making up the majority of the health workforce and working in all settings, nurses are a significant source of information and well-placed to answer questions, quell fears and dispel misinformation and myths to support people in making informed decisions about vaccination.

Research has shown that lack of recommendation by a health professional is one of the main barriers to immunisation. ICN believes that nurses can be powerful role models for patients and as leaders in the community to lead the way in enhancing public trust, communicating accurate information and supporting and promoting effective and evidence-based public health measures, including vaccination. Considering the valuable experience and expertise of nurses, a strategic focus on nurses' full involvement in immunisation and actively involving nurses, nurse leaders and nursing organisations in committees for COVID-19 vaccination and in developing national immunisation strategies will support vaccine access and uptake.

PROTECTING THE HEALTH WORKFORCE

Millions of nurses and other healthcare workers still do not have access to COVID-19 vaccines as they risk their lives and continue to carry out their duties to provide essential health services and to respond to the pandemic. Younger and less vulnerable people in high-income and upper-middle-income countries are being vaccinated before healthcare workers and vulnerable populations in the majority of countries throughout the world. Nurses are at high risk of contracting the virus and hundreds of thousands of healthcare workers have died from COVID-19. Infections and deaths will continue unless healthcare workers are prioritized to be vaccinated.

Nurses and healthcare workers are victims of verbal abuse and physical violence including racism, misogyny, unfounded character assassinations and even death threats from individuals who oppose COVID-19 vaccination, fueled by misinformation and public distrust. These actions violate the human rights of all persons who are all entitled to freedom from harm in the workplace and in all settings.³

These abuses and the fear of becoming ill or transmitting the virus is causing high rates of mental

distress, including anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. Having to work in these conditions will increase the number of nurses leaving the profession, worsening future nursing workforce shortages.

Ensuring healthcare workers are vaccinated not only protects their health and wellbeing, but is also critical to protecting patients, families and colleagues, which is particularly important for vulnerable populations, such as unvaccinated children, immunocompromised individuals and older persons. Vaccinated nurses can share their experiences of vaccination with patients and the public and act as role models, thereby supporting vaccine uptake. Reducing the number and severity of COVID-19 infections in the healthcare workers and in the public is also necessary to protect the resilience of the health workforce and of health systems. Worldwide shortages of nurses and healthcare workers, worsened by the pandemic, and damages inflicted on healthcare systems by the pandemic, is having grave consequences and will continue to severely impact the ability of health systems to function effectively to provide high-quality care and achieve universal health coverage.

References

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