



## **68<sup>th</sup> session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean**

Provisional agenda item 3(a)

### **Accelerating health emergency preparedness and response – a plan of action**

#### **October 2021 (virtual session)**

Representing the over 27 million nurses worldwide, the International Council of Nurses (ICN) believes that the involvement of nurses is essential to preventing and responding to epidemics and pandemics and reduce existing health emergency risk.

There is an urgent need to accelerate efforts to build capacities of nurses at all levels to limit morbidity and mortality and maintain health system functioning and community wellbeing in the midst of continued health threats and disasters. ICN recently issued updated Core Competencies in Disaster Nursing with the aim of improving disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. These are available to Member States to support workforce development and ICN encourages nursing educational programmes, institutions employing nurses and organisations participating in disaster and emergency response to adopt these competencies.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the contribution of the nursing workforce to strong and resilient health systems and the risk they have taken to respond to the pandemic. ICN is seriously concerned about the long-term impact of COVID-19 on the nursing workforce, including the persistence of high workloads in difficult working conditions, the rising rates of mental distress and the worsening of nursing workforce shortages. Considering this, it is crucial to include the health and safety of the healthcare workforce in all health emergency preparedness and response plans at every level. We strongly urge Member States to ensure decent working environments and appropriate working hours, provide training and continuous education on infection control, strengthen surveillance systems for health worker infections and deaths, rapidly scale up psychological support to nurses and other health workers and effectively recruit and retain the nursing workforce.

Building on the lessons learned in this crisis, investing in the nursing workforce and integrating the WHO Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery (2021-2025) into national health systems planning should be placed at the core of development for the way forward. Nurses, accounting for almost 50% of health professionals in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, are leading the response in the pandemic and ensuring the delivery of safe and quality essential services in communities. We emphasize that the engagement and empowerment of nurse leaders in the region, such as the Chief Nursing Officer at government level, is essential to supporting the plan of action for health emergency preparedness and response. In this regard we call on the Regional Committee to appoint a Chief Nursing Officer for the Eastern Mediterranean region and urge Member States to establish and strengthen senior leadership positions for the nursing workforce in the region.