

GLOBAL PATIENT SAFETY ACTION PLAN 2021–2030

Towards eliminating avoidable harm in health care



World Health
Organization



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Executive summary

Why do we need a Global Patient Safety Action Plan?

Today, patient harm due to unsafe care is a large and growing global public health challenge and is one of the leading causes of death and disability worldwide. Most of this patient harm is avoidable. As countries strive to achieve universal health coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals, the beneficial effects of improved access to health services can be undermined by unsafe care. Patient safety incidents can cause death and disability, and suffering for victims and their families. The financial and economic costs of safety lapses are high. There is often reduced public confidence and trust in local health systems when such incidents are publicized. Health workers involved in serious incidents involving death or serious harm to a patient can also suffer lasting psychological harm and deep-seated feelings of guilt and self-criticism.

The benefits of having a strategic and coordinated approach to patient safety, addressing the common causes of harm and the approaches to preventing it, have been recognized by policy-makers and political and health leaders worldwide. Global advocacy in recent years has culminated in the adoption by the Seventy-second World Health Assembly (in 2019) of resolution WHA72.6 on “Global action on patient safety”.

The resolution urges Member States – and, where applicable, regional economic integration organizations – to recognize patient safety as a health priority in health sector policies and programmes to achieve universal health coverage. The World Health Assembly also requested the World Health Organization (WHO) to formulate a global patient safety action plan in

consultation with Member States and all relevant stakeholders.

The Seventy-fourth World Health Assembly (in 2021) approved the Decision WHA74(13) to adopt the Global Patient Safety Action Plan 2021–2030 and to request the Director-General to report back on progress in the implementation of the Global Patient Safety Action Plan 2021–2030 to the Seventy-sixth World Health Assembly in 2023 and thereafter every two years until 2031.

What is patient safety?

Patient safety is: “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.”

How big is the problem of unsafe care?

Every year, large numbers of patients are harmed or die because of unsafe health care, creating a high burden of death and disability worldwide, especially in low- and middle-income countries. On average, an estimated one in 10 patients is subject to an adverse event while receiving hospital care in high-income countries. Available evidence suggests that 134 million adverse events due to unsafe care occur in hospitals in low- and middle-income countries, contributing to around 2.6 million deaths every year. According to recent estimates, the social cost of patient harm can be valued at US\$ 1 trillion to 2 trillion a year.

What will success look like?

The Global Patient Safety Action Plan strives to eliminate avoidable harm in health care with the vision of “a world in which no one is harmed in health care, and every patient receives safe and respectful care, every time, everywhere”.

The ultimate goal is to achieve the maximum possible reduction in unavoidable harm due to unsafe health care globally.

The mission of the global action plan is to drive forward policies, strategies and actions, based on science, patient experience, system design and partnerships, to eliminate all sources of avoidable risk and harm to patients and health workers.

What principles will guide implementation?

Seven guiding principles establish underpinning values to shape the development and implementation of the action plan:

- ▶ engage patients and families as partners in safe care
- ▶ achieve results through collaborative working
- ▶ analyse and share data to generate learning
- ▶ translate evidence into actionable and measurable improvement
- ▶ base policies and action on the nature of the care setting
- ▶ use both scientific expertise and patient experience to improve safety
- ▶ instil a safety culture in the design and delivery of health care.

Who are the key delivery

- ▶ **Health care facilities and services.** All health care facilities ranging from primary health centres to large teaching hospitals, irrespective of ownership and scope of services.
- ▶ **Stakeholders.** Nongovernmental organizations, patients and patient organizations, professional bodies and scientific associations and societies, academic and research institutions and civil society organizations.
- ▶ **WHO Secretariat.** WHO at all levels – country offices, regional offices and headquarters.

What is the framework for action?

The global action plan provides a framework for action through seven strategic objectives and is further elucidated through 35 strategies, five under each of the strategic objectives, to create a seven by five matrix.

Each strategy has been further operationalized into suggested actions for four key groups or categories of partners: governments, health care facilities and services, stakeholders and the WHO Secretariat.

The seven strategic objectives (SOs) of the Global Patient Safety Action Plan 2021–2030 are as follows.

- ▶ SO1: Make zero avoidable harm to patients a state of mind and a rule of engagement in the planning and delivery of health care everywhere.
- ▶ SO2: Build high-reliability health systems and health organizations that protect patients daily from harm.
- ▶ SO3: Assure the safety of every clinical process.
- ▶ SO4: Engage and empower patients and families to help and support the journey to safer health care.
- ▶ SO5: Train, educate, skill and protect every health

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