

17 September 2020 – Today, Iraq joins the world in commemorating World Patient Safety Day under the theme "Health worker safety: a priority for patient safety". It focuses on the interrelationship between health worker safety and patient safety with the slogan "Safe health workers, safe patients."

A safe working environment for health workers is essential in ensuring a safe environment for patients. Like many countries across the world, Iraq is currently facing an unprecedented challenge in protecting the safety of patients as it grapples with the threat posed by COVID-19. Addressing the health needs of not only patients infected with COVID-19 but all patients in a country already facing a humanitarian crisis has exerted immense pressure on an overburdened health care system, and health workers are finding themselves at increased risk of infection, violence, accidents, stigma, illness and even death.

Working in stressful and unsafe environments exacerbates these risks. Health workers facing the increased risk of infection can potentially also contribute to outbreaks in health care facilities, this coupled with limited access to personal protective equipment and sometimes an inability to implement effective infection and prevention and control measures, is only increasing risks for patients. Since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Iraq in February 2020, over 14 500 health care workers have been infected, representing 4.8% of the total number of infections in the country.

Ensuring patient safety is a prerequisite for strengthening health systems and making progress towards universal health coverage – a target of Sustainable Development Goal 3 "ensuring healthy lives and promoting health and well-being for all at all ages". Each year, 134 million adverse events occur in hospitals in low- and middle-income countries, due to unsafe care, resulting in 2.6 million deaths globally. As many as 4 in 10 patients are harmed in primary and outpatient health care, and up to 80% of harm is preventable. The majority of these events are related to incorrect diagnosis, prescription and use of medicines.

Investments in reducing patient harm can lead to significant financial savings, and more importantly, result in better patient outcomes. In addition, effectively engaging patients can reduce the burden of harm by up to 15% and increase community trust in the quality of care they receive.

In Iraq, WHO is working closely with health authorities providing technical support to ensure that patients are protected and by advancing the patient safety agenda at the highest political level, with support from international partners.

WHO has also developed a range of technical guidance to help ensure the safety of patients, including the "Safe childbirth checklist" and "Surgical safety checklist, and by offering guidance on patient safety solutions and medication safety. WHO's support also includes fostering collaboration between the Ministry of Health and relevant stakeholders, identifying priorities for action, supporting capacity building of health workers and monitoring improvements in patient safety.

This year, WHO is calling on all individuals to "Speak up for health worker safety" and is asking for greater investment, by all stakeholders, in the safety of health workers as a priority for patient safety. WHO calls on policy-makers, regulators, parliamentarians and others to formulate, update and implement policies and legislation to ensure the safety of health workers and patients and develop and promote legislation for the protection of health workers and the rights of patients.

WHO also calls on health care leaders, administrators and hospital managers to create an open, equitable and transparent culture of safety for health workers and patients to report incidents in a timely way and create a supportive, safe working environment and implement innovative safety practices based on best practice.

Finally, WHO calls on health workers to protect their own physical and psychological health because as essential workers on the frontline of the fight against COVID-19 if they do not protect their own health they are less able to protect their patients.

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