

Agenda Item 6.6 Patient Safety: Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene in Health Care Facilities

Global Health Council supported by the Frontline Health Workers Coalition welcomes the report 144/30 under agenda item 6.6 on Patient Safety.

As noted in the Director-General's report, adequate water, sanitation and hygiene in health care facilities is critical to quality care and infection prevention, yet too many health facilities still don't meet basic standards. A 2018 study of nearly 130,000 health facilities in 78 low and middle-income countries found half lacked access to piped water, a third were without access to improved toilets, and 39% did not have facilities for handwashing with soap.

These circumstances present unacceptable risks to frontline health workers and their patients. An estimated 15% of patients develop one or more infections during a hospital stay, and new mothers and newborns are especially vulnerable. More than 1 million deaths each year are associated with unclean births. Recurrent infections due to poor WASH also result in increased prophylactic use of antibiotics, contributing to antimicrobial resistance. Beyond the implications for disease transmission, unsafe and unhygienic conditions in health care facilities negatively impact health worker attendance, morale, retention and safety.

We applaud WHO and UNICEF's leadership and efforts to date on this issue. While incremental progress has been made, ongoing challenges include poor coordination between the WASH and health sectors, a lack of political will and financing, and inadequate infrastructure and health worker training at the facility level. Additional country support, prioritization, and commitment are needed to achieve change at the scale needed to meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

We call on member states, WHO, and partners to support the draft resolution on WASH in health care facilities put forward by the Governments of Tanzania, Zambia, and eSwatini, and urge the Executive Board to include it as part of the agenda for the 72nd World Health Assembly.