World Health Organization

Caring for those who care: Safeguarding health, safety, and wellbeing of health workers

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Message by WHO Director-General

World Health Organization

Weblink

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Heroes and Then Forgotten? – A Paradox

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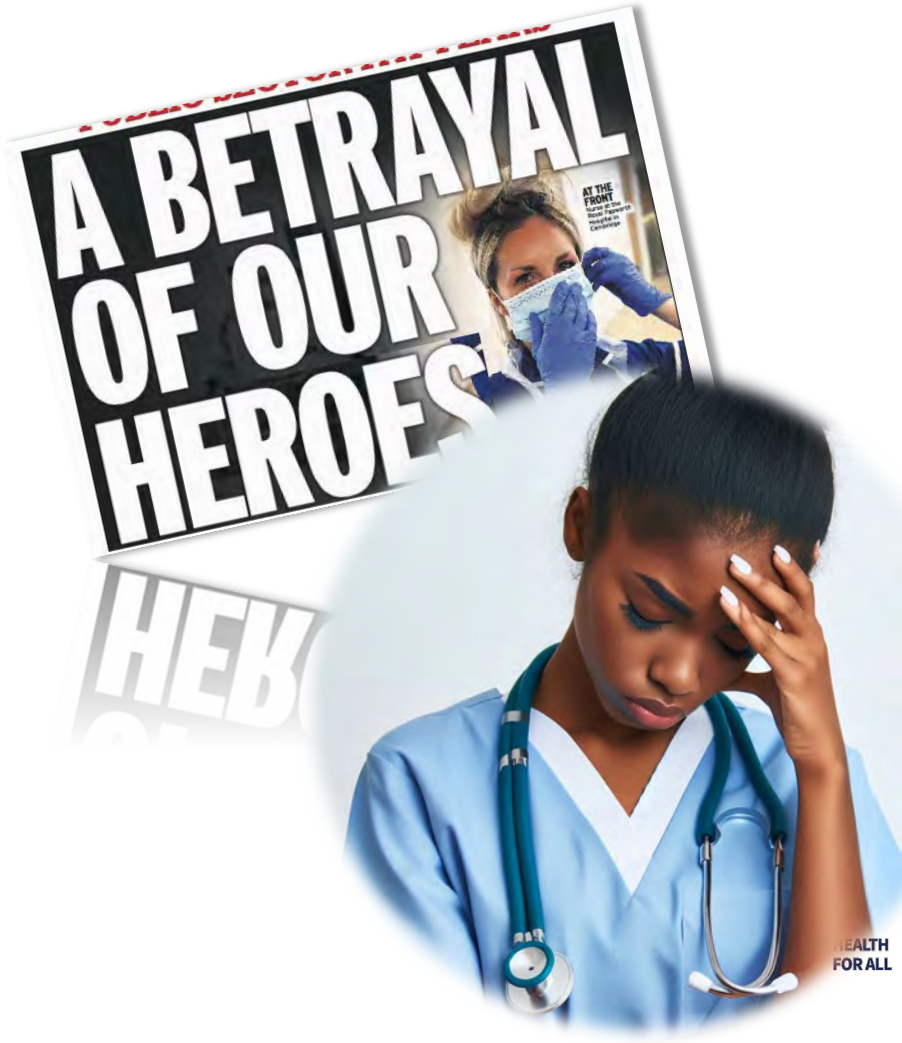
2020

2024



The health sector is among the most hazardous sectors

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Occupational infections

Unsafe patient handling

Hazardous chemicals

Radiation

Environmental health hazards

Psychosocial risks and mental health

Violence and discrimination

Risks in the ambient environment

Occupational injuries

World Health Organization, 2022, https://www.who.int/tools/occupational-hazards-in-health-sector

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The health sector is among the most hazardous sectors

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41% of health workers are exposed to **HBV**, **HCV** and **HIV** resulting in **12,000 cases of infection**

Less than 18% of health workers have been **vaccinated against Hepatitis B**

About 54% of health workers in low- and middle-income countries have **latent tuberculosis** infection

In the 2014–2016 **Ebola outbreak**, the risk of infection in health workers was 21-32 times ↑ than the general population

In the first 17 months of the COVID-19 pandemic about 115,500 health workers **died from COVID-19**

44-83% of nurses in clinical settings have **chronic low back pain**

Medical professions are at higher risk of **suicide** in all parts of the world

During the COVID-19 pandemic, frontline health workers suffered **depression** & **anxiety** (23%) and **insomnia** (39%)

9-100% of health workers have experienced **violence** at the workplace; highest in South Africa (54-100%) and Egypt (60-86%)

Source, World Health Organization, 2022, https://www.who.int/tools/occupational-hazards-in-health-sector

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Health workers are the backbone of health systems, but their health and well-being is often overlooked

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Why is it important to protect health workers?

Regulatory compliance

Implementing occupational safety and health laws and regulations in the workplaces of health system

Quality of care

Improving productivity of health workers, quality of care, patient safety

Resilience

Increasing the resilience of health services in the face of outbreaks and public health emergencies

Health workforce

Stimulating the retention of health workers by improving working conditions

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Occupational health and safety of health workers needs to be scaled up

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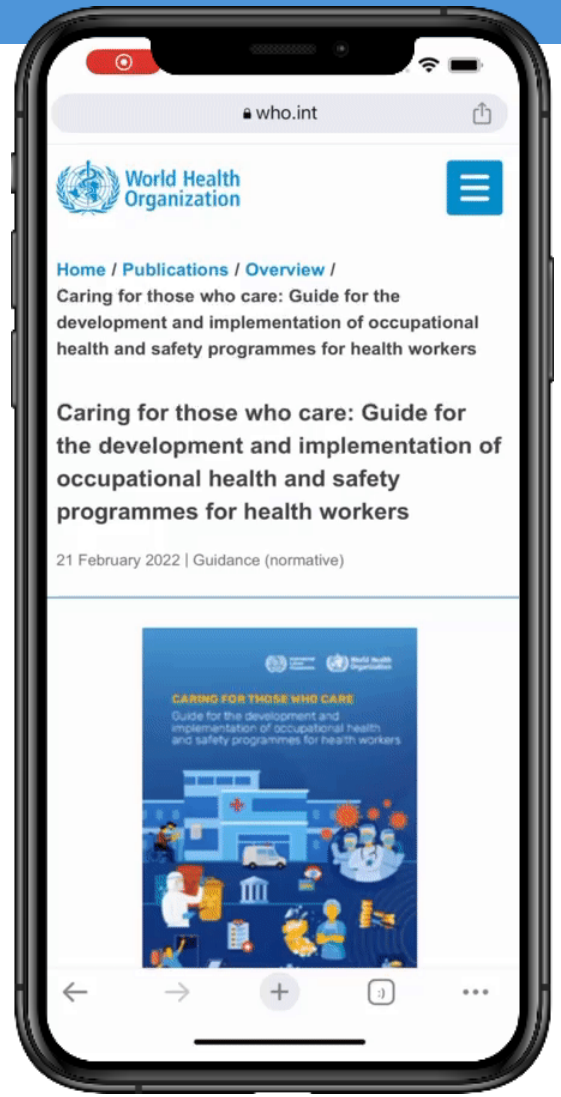
- OHS programmes for health workers should be **developed and implemented continuously** at the national, sub-national and facility levels
- **Introduce new** and **update existing** regulations, standards and codes of good practices for protecting health and safety of health workers
- The protection of health and safety of health workers should become **part and parcel of the management** of health care at all levels
- All health workers should have **access** to competent **occupational health services**
- **Synergies** are needed between OHS programme and other programmes & for collaboration with stakeholders, employers and workers



- Guide for the development and implementation of occupational health and safety programmes for health workers.
- Fact Sheet. Occupational health: health workers.

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OHS programmes for health workers promote shared responsibility, synergy, inclusivity, sustainability, and continuous improvement

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1. Responsibilities of employers and workers

Employers have duties and responsibilities for ensuring OHS in health sector environments; workers have responsibilities in complying with OHS measures

2. Synergy with other programmes

There must be synergy with other programmes eg. Quality and safety of care, health workforce etc.

3. Inclusivity

OHS programmes should be gender-responsive, non-discriminatory and inclusive.

4. Sustainability

OHS Programmes should be sustainable ensuring continuous protection of health workers at all times.

5. Continuous improvement and social dialogue

Collaboration between governments, employers, workers and other stakeholders.

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Only one third of countries have some national policy instrument to protect health and safety of health workers

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AFRO 8/47

AMRO/PAHO 6/33

EMRO 2/21

EURO 7/51

SEARO 1/11

WPRO 4/21

https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/existence-of-national-policy-instruments-for-occupational-health-and-safety-for-health-workers

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Key elements of the OHS programmes for health workers at the national level

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National **policy** statement on OHS for health workers

Person/unit in charge of OHS of health workers

A multi-stakeholder national **steering committee**

Regulations and **standards** for prevention of occupational hazards

Information and **research**

Mechanisms for efficient **financing** of OHS measures for health workers

Adequate **human resources** for OHS for health workers

Adequate **supplies and commodities** for OHS readily available at all levels

Standards for provision of **OH services**, system for quality assurance and a programme for their expansion.

Policies for the provision of support **services** for health workers addressing **TB, HIV** and **Hepatitis B**

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Safe and healthy work environments in healthcare facilities

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Develop a **facility policy** for health and safety at work

Appoint facility **focal point** for occupational health and safety

Conduct regular **risk assessments** and mitigate or put in place effective controls of occupational hazards

Establish a joint **labour–management committee** for health and safety at work

Provide facilities for **personal hygiene** and wellbeing and safe waste disposal

Develop and implement a **training programme** on health and safety at work

Provide **occupational health services** for early detection, diagnosis, treatment, care, notification and support for occupational diseases and injuries

Provide **immunization** to the prevention of work-related infections at no cost to health workers

Record, investigate and report exposure incidents and cases of occupational injuries and diseases

Collect, analyse, report and act upon data to promote health and safety at work

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Development and implementation of occupational health and safety programmes for health workers

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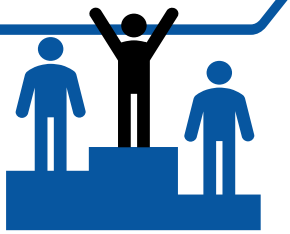
1 Prepare

- Build **political commitment**
- Assess the **current situation**
- Establish a **task force**

2 Develop

- Write the **first draft**
- Carry out a **feasibility assessment**.
- Discuss the first draft with key **stakeholders**.
- Develop a **second draft**
- **Finalize**, obtain approval, publish and disseminate

3 Implement



- Develop a **plan of action** for implementation
- Arrange for **external inspection**, **audit** and **licensure**.
- **Build capacities** for implementation.
- Develop **communication** and technical tools for implementation.
- **Monitor**, **evaluate** and adjust the programme.

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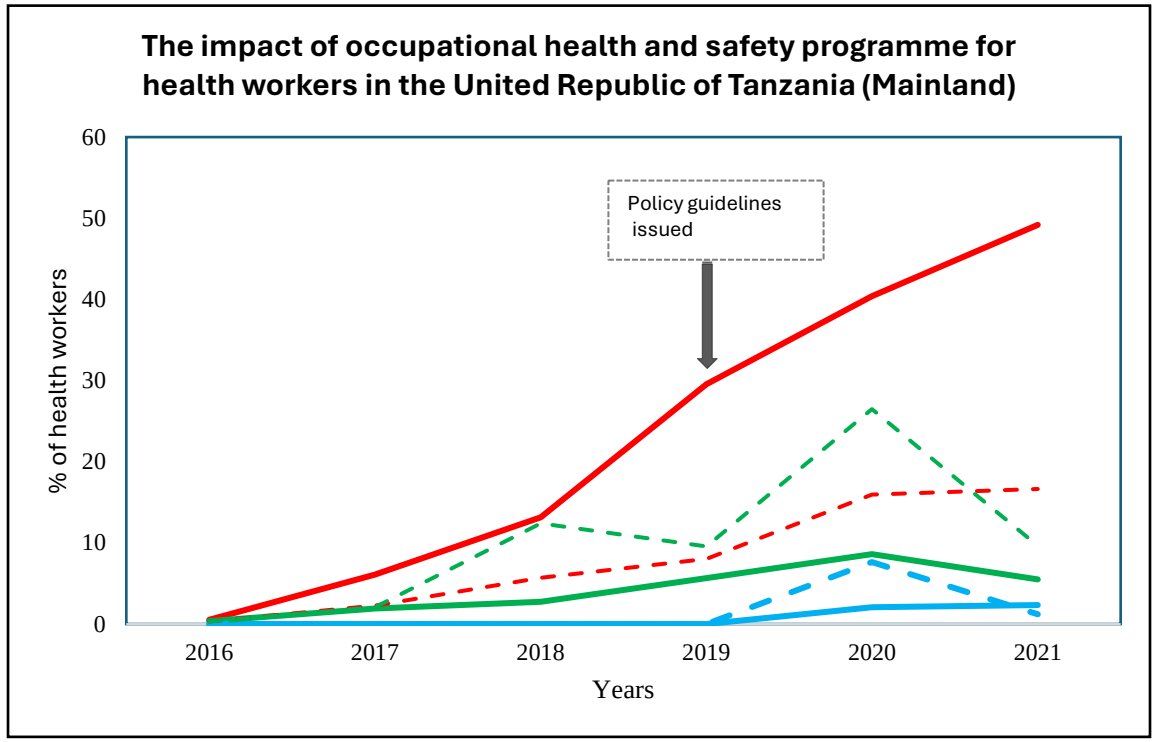
Investing in health workers transforms health outcomes



- Higher uptake of Hepatitis B vaccine among health workers
- Increased coverage with post-exposure prophylaxis of HIV/AIDS
- Improved reporting of cases of violence against health workers

Failure to protect health workers is costly

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1 Health worker infected with COVID-19 costs:

Eswatini	$35,659	Kenya	$33,619
South Africa, KZN	$34,226	Colombia	$10,105
South Africa, WC	$33,781		

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Wang, Huihui, et al. "Modelling the economic burden of SARS-CoV-2 infection in health care workers in four countries." Nature Communications 14.1 (2023): 2791.

Investing in the health safety and wellbeing of health workers is a sound business decision

Globally, improving health, safety and well-being of health workers:

- Lowers the costs of occupational harm (estimated at up to **2%** of health spending)
- Contributes to minimizing patient harm (estimated at up to **12%** of health spending)

Conclusion

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- Health workers are the **backbone** of health systems, but their health and well-being is often overlooked.

- Developing and implementing occupational health and safety **programmes** in the health sector is essential for protecting health workers.

- Protecting healthcare workers is not just a moral obligation; it's a strategic investment leading to improved **quality of care**, **staff retention**, and overall health system **resilience**.

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WHO-ILO resources on safeguarding health, safety and wellbeing of health workers

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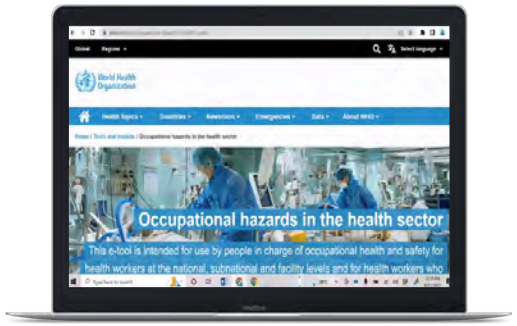

E-tool on occupational hazards in the health sector

Provides guidance on prevention and control of occupational health hazards and their associated risks in health care settings

https://www.who.int/tools/occupational-hazards-in-health-sector .

Occupational safety and health in public health emergencies

Strategies and tools for protecting occupational health and safety in public health emergencies including

https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241514347

Policy brief: National programmes for occupational health for health workers

Provides a short overview on the key issues and recommendations for the protection of health, safety and wellbeing of health workers

https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/336479

Checklist for health care facilities

Helps in identifying and prioritizing areas of action for improving the protection of health and safety of health workers

https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/334371

Open-WHO course

Occupational health and safety of health workers in the context of COVID-19

https://openwho.org/courses/COVID-19-occupational-health-and-safety

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References

- Caring for those who care: guide for developing and implementing occupational health and safety programmes for health workers. WHO/ILO; 2022 (https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/351436).

- Occupational hazards in the health sector. WHO e-tool (http://www.who.int/tools/occupational-hazards-in-health-sector).

- Protection of health and safety of health workers: checklist for health care facilities. WHO; 2020 (https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/334371).

CONTACT

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