Occupational Health and Safety for Nurses

ICN Position:

ICN deplores the lack of appropriate national occupational health and safety legislation covering nurses in their place of employment, the often inadequate mechanisms for workers’ participation in the monitoring/elimination of professional hazards, and the insufficient resources allocated to ensure optimal occupational health and safety services and labour inspection.

ICN promotes the development and application of international policies or instruments that will safeguard the nurses’ right to a safe work environment, including continuing education, immunisation and protective clothing/equipment. ICN reconfirms its mandate to encourage research in this area and to circulate relevant information on a regular basis to member associations.

ICN strongly supports the various ILO Conventions relating to occupational health and safety and believes that national nurses’ associations should:

- Urge their respective governments to ensure that all health agencies fall within the provision of occupational health and safety legislation. This can be done through lobbying, individual and/or collective political action.

- Initiate and/or support research in their countries into the safety and suitability of the work environment of nurses as well as risk behaviours, attitudes, procedures and activities.

- Sensitise nursing personnel, employers and the public to occupational hazards in the health sector, including violence or abuse.

- Raise nurses’ awareness of their rights (as workers) to a safe environment and of their obligations to protect their safety and promote the safety of others.

- Convince governments and employers to adopt and implement all necessary measures to safeguard the health and well-being of nurses at risk in the course of their work, including vaccination when appropriate.

- Urge governments/employers to ensure the access of nursing personnel to protective measures (e.g. clothing) and equipment at no extra cost to staff;

- Encourage nurses to undergo vaccinations relevant to their health and safety in the workplace.

- Cooperate with the competent authorities to ensure the accuracy of the List of Occupational Diseases and periodically evaluate its relevance to nursing personnel.

- Support nurses’ claims for compensation in relation to occupational disease and/or injury.

- Obtain and disseminate information on the incidence of work-related accidents, injuries and illnesses of nurses.

- Cooperate with other organisations supporting the worker’s right to a safe work environment.
Position Statement

- Recognise the important relationships between workers and their families in the development of culturally appropriate occupational health and safety policies and treatment plans.
- Support nurses’ freedom from being intimidated in their role of patient advocate.
- Call for adequate monitoring systems at all levels that will ensure appropriate implementation of policies.
- Disseminate information on the introduction of new hazards in the workplace.
- Disseminate information on non-compliance by employers of occupational health and safety legislation, including reporting mechanisms for such violations.

Background:

ICN recognises the major role occupational health and safety plays in health promotion. Furthermore, ICN acknowledges the growing expertise nurses have gained in the area of occupational health and safety and the cost-effectiveness of the services provided for workers.

ICN supports the expanding role of the occupational health nurse in meeting workers’ primary health care needs, and demands fair remuneration and adequate career structures that support professional development.

The work environment of the nurse is frequently unsafe as a result of:

- Environmental contamination by waste products resulting from human and industrial activity.
- Risks (e.g. chemical, biological, physical, noise, radiation, repetitive work).
- Medical technology – lack of maintenance, insufficient training in the use of technology.
- Inadequate access to protective clothing and safe equipment.
- The disturbance of everyday life patterns associated with shift work.
- The increasing demands made upon the emotional, social, psychological and spiritual resources of the nurse working in complex political, social, cultural, economic and clinical settings.
- Incidents of violence, including sexual harassment.
- Poor ergonomics (engineering and design of medical related equipment, materials and facilities).
- Inadequate allocation of resources, e.g. human, financial.
- Isolation.

Patient care benefits from a safe work environment for health personnel. ICN notes that most governments fail to collect current accurate information on the incidence of accidents, injuries and illness of nursing personnel as the basis for sound policy formulation. The lack of relevant data is a matter of great concern.

In certain countries, there is no occupational health and safety legislation. In others, the means to monitor its implementation and the machinery to discipline the offending employers is ineffective or non-existent. Yet other countries have adopted legislation that excludes hospitals and other health agencies.

*Convention 149 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) concerning Employment and Conditions of Work and Life of Nursing Personnel* calls on member states to “improve existing laws and regulations on occupational health and safety by adapting them to the special nature of nursing work and of the environment in which it is carried out”.

Section IX of the accompanying *Recommendation (157)* further develops the measures considered necessary to guarantee the health and safety of nurses in the workplace.

Adopted in 1987  
Reviewed and updated in 2000

Related ICN Positions:

- Reducing environmental and lifestyle-related health hazards
- Nurses and the Natural Environment
- Tobacco use and Health

The International Council of Nurses is a federation of more than 124 national nurses' associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses for nurses, ICN is the international voice of nursing and works to ensure quality care for all and sound health policies globally.