

Interview with Soins Infirmiers (Swiss nursing magazine)

1. As a "friend" of nurses, you have taken concrete steps to promote nursing (Elizabeth Iro + int. Year of the Nurse). How did you realize that nurses are important? Where does this conviction come from?

As a malaria expert I used to work in the field, seeing nurses serving communities at all levels of the health system. I saw first-hand that nurses are the bridge between communities and the health service.

After I became Minister of Health in Ethiopia, we were trying to expand access to HIV treatment, but we didn't have enough doctors. So we decided to use "task-shifting" to capitalize on the presence of nurses on the front lines of care. They did a fantastic job, expanding access to many people living with HIV.

As Director-General, I consistently encourage countries to invest in their nursing and midwifery work-force to strengthen primary health care and achieve universal health coverage (UHC). Nurses and midwives make up half of the global health workforce, so we cannot achieve our vision of "Health for All" without harnessing their power. We will need 9 million more nurses and midwives if we are to achieve universal health coverage by 2030.

Investing in nursing and other health worker jobs not only expands access to health care, but can also advance economic development through the creation of employment opportunities.

2. Can you tell us about a nurse who made a special impression on you through her work and whom you will never forget?

There isn't just one. I've met so many nurses and midwives all over the world, and I've always been humbled and impressed by the incredible service they give – often in very challenging conditions.

3. What is the exact role Elizabeth Iro? What do you expect from her?

Elizabeth's role is to advise me on nursing and support the implementation of WHO's policies and priorities with respect to universal health coverage, health promotion and disease prevention; primary and community care; as well as emergency preparedness and disaster response and rehabilitation.

She also works with government chief nurses and their equivalents and other senior nursing leaders to develop nursing globally. The aim is to strengthen the role nurses play in implementing WHO's policies and priorities in order to improve physical and mental health and well-being.

Finally, Elizabeth works with colleagues within WHO to ensure that insights and experience from nursing influence policy development and implementation in all areas of WHO work.

4. As Minister of Health in Ethiopia, you have relied on nurses to promote health (against HIV, for instance). Can you explain in more details how this happened and the results obtained?

When I started, treatment coverage for HIV was very low. We realized that without involving front-line health workers, especially nurses, we wouldn't be able to increase coverage to the levels we needed. There was concern from some other health workers and partners that nurses were not well-enough trained to do the job. But we were very confident and moved ahead with good training for the nurses. In the end, even those who were opposed were very happy with the result – expanded services with good quality.

5. How did the idea of declaring 2020 the Year of the Nurse and the Midwife come about?

It was Lord Nigel Crisp and Annette Kennedy, the President of the International Council of Nurses, who first came to me about the Nursing Now campaign and the idea for the Year of the Nurse and the Midwife. I accepted, first to give nurses and midwives the recognition they deserve, but also as a way of addressing the global shortfall in nurses and midwives to achieve universal health coverage. The idea was officially approved by the World Health Assembly in May 2019.

We established a steering committee consisting of Lord Crisp and representatives from UNFPA, WHO, ICN, ICM.

But it's not just a one-year initiative. It's bigger than that. We will sustain things we're starting now to make sure nurses play a bigger role in global health and development.

6. What do you expect from the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife

The overall goal is to increase the recognition of the vital role nurses and midwives play in moving towards universal health coverage, and to mobilize greater investment to improve the education and working conditions of nurses, midwives and nurse practitioners – to attract more people into the workforce and to ensure they continue.

We also want to advocate for gender equality in the health sector. This includes addressing discrimination and bias toward female nurses and midwives, which inhibits career progression and opportunities for leadership. We also want to encourage more men to pursue careers in nursing and midwifery.

In the same manner, we would also like to encourage nurses and midwives to embrace their full scope of practice and fulfil the diversity of roles that nursing and midwifery have to offer.

We want to show, particularly to young people, that nursing and midwifery are exciting opportunities for leadership and attractive careers.

7. The International Year of the Nurse will showcase the contribution of nurses to patient safety. On this point, how do nurses differ from other caregivers?

Nurses play a particularly important role in reducing patient harm. Nurses are closer to the patients at the point of care and spend more time with patients, their families and caregivers than other members of the health care team. They monitor patients for clinical deterioration and detect errors and near misses. They ensure timely management of clinical conditions if harm occurs. They understand care processes and the weaknesses that can occur and – very importantly – they speak up for patient safety. If systems fail, it's the nurse who can prevent harm to patients. But they can only do that effectively if they are working in a blame-free culture.

Nursing care spans all areas of the healthcare delivery system. So nurses are well placed to prevent harm to patients, manage risks and improve the safety of health care. They help to build a bridge between health systems and communities, and to facilitate timely and effective communication within a health care team. It was a nurse researcher who initially showed that getting patients out of bed as soon as possible after surgery reduced recovery time and complications.

Patient safety must be an essential part of the education and training of all nurses, to avoid clinical errors and make health care safer for all patients, everywhere, every time. WHO has a patient safety curriculum, and we are developing a package of resources, guidance and tools to strengthen the competencies of nurse practitioners and nurse leaders in patient safety.

8. What is your expectation towards governments in terms of promoting nursing in 2020? Why?

I encourage governments to embrace the key messages of the 2020 Year of the Nurse and the Midwife campaign, not only in 2020, but for the years beyond. We want to work with governments to ensure that nurses and midwives get the education, the training, the jobs, the conditions, the opportunities, the dignity and the respect they deserve. We also want to promote the presence of nurses and midwives in all sectors of health government, to ensure their contribution to policy and governance.

Recently, WHO has issued a call for all governments to increase their spending on primary health care by 1% of GDP, either through new investments, reallocation or both. A significant part of that investment needs to be in educating, training and employing nurses and midwives.

9. For the World Health Assembly 2020, you invite governments to come with a nurse. What exactly is your message?

I have encouraged governments to include a nurse and a midwife as part of their official delegation to the World Health Assembly. This will demonstrate their support for the Year of the Nurse and the Midwife, and provide recognition of these professions and their contribution to health for all. Very often the discussions we have and the decisions we make at the World Health Assembly have a direct bearing on the work of nurses and midwives, but they are not there to participate and have their voices heard. I hope to see more nurses and midwives making interventions on behalf of their countries at the 2020 WHA.

I commend those countries who have included their senior nurses in their delegations in past WHAs.

10. Do you have a special message for the Swiss authorities who do not have a Chief nurse officer? Are you inviting them to come with another nurse of influence, for example, the president of the Swiss Nurses Association?

Yes, I encourage all countries that don't already have a chief nursing officer to appoint one, including Switzerland. Government chief nursing and midwifery officers play a vital role in shaping nursing and midwifery workforce strategies and policies and contribute to strengthening health systems through the delivery of quality education; practice (clinical and primary health care), and promotive, preventative, rehabilitative and palliative care programmes. It is important to have nurse leaders at the policy decision-making level.

11. How would you explain our government the importance of creating such a position, knowing that our newspaper is sent every month to the members of the Swiss Parliament? What strong argument would you have to convince them?

Government chief nursing and midwifery officers in health ministries have been key stakeholders in driving nursing and midwifery workforce strategies. Through their policy and management functions they provide an invisible backbone for health systems. Having an empowered and effective nursing and midwifery leadership is essential to mobilize appropriate resources, motivate and inspire practising nurses and midwives. At the same time, they contribute to shaping health policy and strategy directions for their countries' health needs and priorities.

12. In regard to the first report on The State of the World's Nursing, what are your long-term objectives? In Singapore, at the ICN Congress, you talked about a "major renovation", what exactly are you thinking about? What would you say about the situation in Switzerland?

The State of the World's Nursing report will provide a global evidence base to demonstrate the contribution of nursing towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. It will

support evidence-based planning to optimize the contributions of this vast workforce to improve health and well-being for all.

It will be the basis for initiating policy dialogue and policy development based on national health needs and priorities. Our long-term objectives are to increase investments in nursing, midwifery, professional education, standards and regulations; to boost the numbers of nurses in leadership positions and nurse-led clinics, and to ensure nurses and midwives work to their full potential.

But it won't be a one-off publication. Our plan is to make it a regular report, to provide an evolving and up-to-date evidence base.

13. According to WHO, there is a global shortage of 9 million nurses and midwives to achieve universal health coverage by 2030. How can the Year of the Nurse and Midwife contribute to fill the gap?

The 2020 Year of the Nurse and the Midwife will raise the visibility of the nursing and midwifery workforce globally. With the launch of the State of the World's Nursing report in 2020 we will have the evidence and the data to inform policy dialogue and policy changes in countries. This report will have evidence to argue for an increased investment in nurses and midwives, for training, regulation, and employment.

But of course, our efforts must extend beyond 2020. We will not close the gap next year. We must continue the advocacy in the years to come.

14. Last summer in Singapore, you said that "any society with too few health workers is operating with one hand tied behind its back". Can you explain your thinking?

Inadequate staffing levels can lead to poor patient outcomes. If staffing levels and the work environment are not safe for nurses, they will not be safe for the patients.

Staff shortages can lead to lower job satisfaction, compromised quality of care, increased likelihood of errors being made, increased levels of stress, and eventual staff burnout.

15. In the current context of budget restriction, how do you encourage world leaders and government around the globe to invest more in the nursing workforce?

The most important point we emphasize is that health workers are not a cost, they're an investment that pays a triple return for health, gender equality and economic growth.

Investments in health create jobs, reduce poverty, lead to increased productivity, stimulate economic growth, reduce treatment costs, and protect countries from the economic impacts of disease outbreaks and other emergencies.

WHO's own investment case estimates that reaching its "triple billion" targets (one billion more people benefitting from universal health coverage; one billion more people better protected from health emergencies; and one billion more people enjoying better health and wellbeing by 2023) could add an additional 2% to 4% of economic growth in low- and middle-income countries over the next five years alone.

So the question is not whether countries can afford to invest in health workers; it's whether they can afford not to.

16. How is the collaboration between WHO and the Swiss authorities?

WHO collaborates with Switzerland in three ways:

First, Switzerland is one of our 194 Member States, who determine what WHO does through the World Health Assembly.

Second, Switzerland is the host country of WHO's headquarters and as such provides WHO with excellent working conditions. Our headquarters are currently being further improved through the construction of a new building for which the Swiss and Geneva authorities have provided a 140 million CHF interest-free loan for 50 years, which will be followed by a total renovation of our beautiful main building, which was built in 1966. We have also started to intensify our exchange with the local population through the annual Walk the Talk event, which brings together the local population with delegates to the annual World Health Assembly for a walk and run through Geneva on a Sunday in May.

Third, Switzerland contributes financially to WHO's work through its membership fees: US\$ 10 million for the 2016-2017 biennium, but also through voluntary contributions of US\$ 21 million during the same period.

17. During the ICN Congress in Singapore, you announced the establishment of an annual award for nurses and midwives. What is it about exactly?

It's quite simple. Nurses and midwives are some of the unsung heroes of health. They do extraordinary things and save lives every single day. The world must hear their voices and their stories. As part of the Year of the Nurse and Midwife, it's time we gave them more public recognition. At the World Health Assembly, we give awards to health leaders in numerous other fields, but until now we have not had an award devoted specifically to nurses and midwives.

18. You also want to promote health and well-being for nurses. Is this objective realistic in a context of shortage and economic austerity?

It is important for healthcare workers to deliver quality patient-centred health care that is respectful. For this to happen, they must operate in a quality environment in which they are treated with respect.

But in reality, many nurses and midwives experience discrimination and abuse in the workplace. This is a stain on our sector, and a betrayal of our calling as health professionals.

Health facilities must not only be places of healing for patients. They must be places that foster well-being for health workers, especially those working in vulnerable and fragile settings.

Discrimination and abuse, including violence and harassment, have no place in our societies, and especially not in our health systems.

If the workplace is not safe for nurses and midwives, the outcome for patients will be compromised.

19. What do you expect from the meeting of the Government Chief Nurse and Midwife Officers in May in Geneva? Will this be their first meeting?

WHO has hosted the Government Chief Nursing and Midwifery Officers (GCNMO) forum biennially since 2004, immediately before the World Health Assembly. The objective of the meeting is to support nursing and midwifery leadership at national, regional and international levels in the context of the SDGs.

This platform provides a strategic approach to addressing the nursing and midwifery needs, and their roles and responsibilities as nursing and midwifery leaders. In 2020 the outcomes of the State of the World's Nursing report will be a main agenda item.

With only 10 years left until 2030 – the deadline for achieving the SDGs – this will be a good platform to remind nurses and midwives to work with a sense of urgency and to be advocates for primary health care and health for all.

20. How do you explain that nurses and other health workers become targets in armed conflicts?

Since 2017, WHO has monitored attacks on health care using its Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care. So far this year (as of 10 December 2019) we have recorded 965 attacks, resulting in 184 deaths and 617 injuries of health workers and patients from 11 countries. The impact of attacks on health workers is far-reaching. When a nurse, doctor, or other health worker is killed or injured, or flees an area of insecurity and can no longer work, their community loses an invaluable asset. Additionally, the time and money required to educate a new health worker to fill this gap places an extraordinary challenge on these countries. The psychological impacts are also dire, affecting health workers' ability to continue providing essential health care services in volatile situations.

Our mission is to ensure the right to health for all, including in conflict situations. That's why we need to condemn any acts of violence that hinder the delivery of health care and ensure that protective mechanisms are so nurses and other health workers can continue delivering essential health care services to vulnerable populations.

21. For what kind of world are you fighting?

We're fighting for WHO's vision: the highest attainable standard of health for all people, which is based on the conviction that health is a human right for all people. More recently, we have adopted a new mission statement, which is to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable. These are the specific priorities we are focusing on in order to fulfil our vision. A strong nursing workforce is key to our achieving this world.