



Position Statement

Mental health

ICN Position:

Mental health, a crucial aspect of well being, remains sorely neglected, under-resourced and plagued by stigma in most societies. The International Council of Nurses (ICN) deplores the fact that stigma, discrimination, treatment gaps, and lack of access to services and to continuity of care continue to exist globally.

ICN and national nurses associations (NNAs) are deeply concerned about the quality and continuity of treatment and care for people with mental disorders, their families and communities, the stigma and discrimination of people suffering mental health disorders and their caregivers, including health professionals.

ICN believes efficient, effective mental health services will only be achieved through a coordinated, inter-sectoral, community-based strategy. ICN urges governments to move towards community-based programmes, to complement existing services, focused on the promotion of mental health, prevention of mental illness, early intervention, and home-based treatment, care and rehabilitation.

ICN acknowledges the continued importance of hospital inpatient, day care and community residential facilities, based on the condition and need of people living with mental illness, and the need for increased support for informal caregivers.

Greater attention should be paid to the developmental and mental health of vulnerable groups (women, young people, elderly, poor, abused, addicted, refugees, etc); to securing sufficient financial and human resources for effective service delivery, and to the education and training of mental health specialists.

ICN calls on governments to:

- Set policy, including legislation, to protect and improve mental health and supply effective, integrated, community-based mental health services.
- Maintain information systems that measure and report on mental health indicators and outcomes.
- Provide appropriate human resources and technology, including drug therapy.
- Identify and support mental health research priorities.
- Undertake a multi-stakeholder campaign to address stigma in mental health.

**International
Council of Nurses**

3, place Jean-Marteau
CH -1201 Geneva • Switzerland
Telephone +41 (22) 908 0100
Fax +41 (22) 908 0101
e-Mail : icn@icn.ch
Website : www.icn.ch

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ICN calls on the health professions to:

- Combat the stigma and discrimination associated with mental health problems.
- Promote high ethical standards in policy, services and research.
- Promote and disseminate research in the field of mental health.
- Lobby for financial, human and technological resources, integrated community-based care and government accountability.

Further ICN calls on nurses and NNAs to:

- Work for involvement of nurses in mental health policy development.
- Advocate for integration of mental health into nursing curriculum at basic, post basic and continuing education levels.
- Support the continued development of mental health services.

NNAs and nurses should advocate for the provision of mental health support to the health care workforce, particularly during and following distressful situations.

Background

Some 500 million people worldwide suffer from mental disorders and all people are at risk of mental health problems, often due to stressful lifestyles, dysfunctional relationships, civil conflict, violence, physical illness, infection or trauma. Mental health problems are expected to increase globally due to social and economic problems such as unemployment, crime, poverty, racial intolerance, substance abuse, homelessness and abuse.

Stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness have negative consequences on the health and well-being of the patient, family and health professionals. Stigma is also a barrier to seeking proper care and treatment and to the integration of people with mental illness into the community.

Nurses are integral to holistic approaches to mental health promotion, prevention, care, treatment and rehabilitation of people living with mental health problems and support of their families and communities.

As well, nurses are key in reducing the stigma of mental illness. However, qualified practitioners and leaders in mental health nursing are in short supply due to recruitment and retention problems.

Mental health/psychiatric nurses in some countries are not valued and educational programmes in care, management, research, and policy are inadequate.

Mental health problems are common in all health care settings, and physical illness is often accompanied by a mental health problem. Thus all nurses must have knowledge and skills to be able to respond to people's mental health needs.

The mental health needs of nurses and other health professionals need to be addressed, particularly during and following distressful situations.

Adopted in 1995
Reviewed and revised in 2002 and 2008

Related ICN Positions:

- Nurses and primary health care
- Nursing research
- Nurses and human rights
- Management of nursing and health care services

ICN Publications:

- Mental Health: Tackling the Challenges, ICN Fact Sheet, 2001.
- Mental Health Atlas, 2007

The International Council of Nurses is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality nursing care for all and sound health policies globally.