



Position Statement

Universal access to clean water

ICN Position:

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) believes that the right to clean water is non-negotiable. Secure access to safe water is a universal need and fundamental human right; an essential resource to meet basic human needs, and to sustain livelihoods and development. Water is a public good and ICN opposes privatisation of water services and resources. ICN also believes that with commitment and political will by governments and others, clean and safe water can be made accessible to all people at low cost using appropriate technology.

ICN supports the target set in the UN Millennium Development Goals that aim to halve by 2015 the number of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water¹. Access to safe water is a key aspect of effective poverty alleviation strategies.

ICN calls on nurses and national nurses associations (NNAs) to:

- Work with representatives of other sectors such as local government and water resources to lobby for clean and safe water supply.
- Urge their governments to provide safe and accessible water to the whole population.
- Lobby for a pro-poor and gender sensitive approach based on understanding of the roles of women and men in water management, so that women and men can participate equally to increase access to clean water.

Further ICN calls on nurses and NNAs to work with national and international bodies concerned with water supply to:

- Heighten vigilance and ensure safety of water supplies from intentional attacks, using biological, chemical or other harmful agents.
- Lobby for sound regulatory policies that ensure universal access to clean water.
- Monitor the public health impact of deregulation and privatisation of water supply, especially on vulnerable populations.

ICN is concerned that climate change and global warming often associated with drought, flooding and disruptions of water supply will threaten public health.

¹ United Nations. UN Millennium Summit, Sept. 2000.

Background

Nurses work with individuals, families and communities to promote health, to prevent illness, to restore health and to alleviate suffering². Nursing's mission to achieve these goals would be frustrated without access of the population to clean and safe water supply.

Rapid population growth, industrialization, urbanization, agricultural intensification, climate change and water-intensive lifestyles are resulting in global water crisis. About 20 per cent of the population lacks access to safe drinking water, while 50 per cent lacks access to a safe sanitation system³.

More than 3 million people die each year from water-related diseases such as diarrhoea⁴; and millions suffer from diseases such as dysentery and trachoma. Disease due to poor sanitation and hygiene cause the deaths of 2 million children every year⁵.

Due to environmental degradation and pollution, sources of water supply are threatened with contamination by sewage and harmful bacteria, chemicals such as nitrates; heavy metals such as lead, mercury, and arsenic; and persistent organic compounds.

The lack of clean water supply poses a serious threat to public health. It also adds to the heavy burden of women in some countries, who often travel long distances to fetch water on their back, with serious health consequences. Despite the back-breaking task to collect water, such water is often contaminated with animal, human, or industrial waste and other contaminants with harmful consequences to health.

There is growing concern that sources of water supply can be targeted for attack by bacteriological, chemical or other agents with the intention to cause harm to large populations.

Global trends toward deregulation and privatisation of water supply represent serious barriers to universal access to clean and safe water.

The impact of climate change and global warming represents a threat to availability of safe water.

² International Council of Nurses (2000), Code of Ethics for Nurses. Geneva: ICN.

³ www.unep.org

⁴ World Health Organization. Water and Health. Bulletin of the World Health Organisation, 79 (5), 486.

⁵ WSSCC/WHO/UNICEF Global Assessment Report, 2000

Adopted in 1995
Reviewed and revised in 2008

Related ICN Positions:

- Reducing environmental and lifestyle-related health hazards
- Towards elimination of weapons of war and conflict
- Nurses and primary health care
- Nurses and human rights

ICN Publications

- Fact Sheet on Safe Household Water: Preventing Disease, Saving Lives.

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.