

**Opening address by the Minister of Health, DR ZL Mkhize
for
the World Patient Safety Day Webinar
Date: 17 September 2020
Venue: Virtual Webinar**

- Programme Director
- WHO Country Representative Dr Owen Kaluwa
- Distinguished panel members
- Members of the media
- Ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for joining us as we celebrate World Patient Safety Day which is being observed all around the world today.

World Patient Safety Day was established by the 72nd World Health Assembly in May 2019 with the specific purpose of raising awareness about the need to improve patient safety and mobilising support for this goal. Today we are celebrating the second World Patient Safety Day under the theme: *Health worker safety: a priority for patient safety* with a call to speak up for health worker safety.

The theme was chosen because the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the significant challenges and risks that health workers around the world confront in the line of professional duty. While the danger of infection is presently top of mind, many of you will know first-hand that health workers also face violence, stigma, and psychological and emotional stress. Working under such pressure, with their health and even their lives at risk, makes health workers more prone to errors which can lead to patient harm.

Your wellbeing, as health workers, and the safety of patients across the country are inseparable and must be addressed comprehensively. With this in mind, we have invited a range of stakeholders to join us in observing World Patient Safety Day. We hope we will be able to work collaboratively in a sustained effort to reduce the unintended harm caused by healthcare.

I am confident that each and every participant in this event would subscribe without reservation to the fundamental principle of medicine: first do no harm. Yet patient harm is a common occurrence. In high-income countries, according to the WHO, about 1 in 10 patients

is harmed while receiving hospital care. And in low and middle-income countries about 134 million adverse events occur annually in hospitals, contributing to 2.6 million deaths every year.

Clearly, we need a sharper understanding of the factors contributing to patient harm and better insight into approaches that would enhance patient safety. Building knowledge is one of the objectives of World Patient Safety Day. Another important objective is to engage the public more actively in our efforts to enhance patient safety and reduce patient harm.

South Africa, along with other countries, is moving towards Universal Health Coverage and striving to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Our National Health Insurance (NHI) seeks to provide all South Africans access to quality essential health services - that is, services that are supported by effective systems, are people-centred and are capable of delivering safe care. Safe, quality care should not be the preserve of an elite, nor should it be an aspiration for some distant future: it should be the DNA of all health systems.

World Patient Safety Day in 2020 directs our attention to the importance of keeping health workers safe. It provides an opportunity to reflect on our management of health worker safety and to strengthen our collective ability to protect our workers.

I also welcome this commemoration as a moment to express our profound gratitude to our health workers for the risks that they have taken and continue to take as we navigate our way through the COVID-19 pandemic. This disease has been a powerful reminder of a simple truth: there is no healthcare system without a capable and dedicated workforce. Our health workers are infinitely precious and, as government, we asserted that their protection is non-negotiable. This means we need to reflect on our performance since March, eliminate our weaknesses and expand our most successful practices.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic reached South Africa, there were 32 429 confirmed cases of healthcare workers that have been infected with COVID-19 as at 11 September. Sadly, 257 Health workers succumbed to the infection. The WHO has estimated that health care workers account for 10% of the global cumulative cases identified.

We are particularly cognizant of the fact that health workers not only took on board a significant risk to themselves, but also increased the risk of transmitting the virus to their families and loved ones. For months our health workers have waged an exhausting battle to do their utmost for their patients, to preserve their own physical and mental strength, and to keep their family members safe. Caring for patients has often involved critical life and death decisions - and supporting many patients whose lives ended without the comfort of loved ones at the bedside. The psychological burden of all these factors has weighed heavily on healthcare workers, in many cases undermining their mental health and causing occupational burnout.

It is probably true to say nothing could have prepared us fully for the onslaught on the COVID-19 epidemic, although we were able to take lessons from countries affected earlier than us. But we have been at work in the Department of Health, making meaning of the experiences of the last few months and one of the results is a national *Strategy to protect the health and safety of health workers*.

World Patient Safety Day is a fitting opportunity to launch this strategy which seeks to protect the both the physical and

mental health of frontline health workers and acknowledges their need for social support:

- The strategy aims to protect the physical health of health workers through prevention and mitigation of COVID-19 infections by providing a safe physical environment.
- It also seeks to promote mental health of health workers through psychological support and to provide necessary social support.
- It focuses on educating and training health workers to manage COVID-19 cases and implement occupational health and safety protocols.
- And it recognises the importance of communication among health workers.

The strategy incorporates key infection prevention and control provisions that protect the **physical health** of health workers. These include patient placement, sufficient ventilation in facilities, hand hygiene, environmental cleaning and wearing of personal protective clothing appropriate to the task being performed. We have insisted that every province, every district and every facility must have active, well-functioning occupational health and safety committees to ensure that there is adequate medical surveillance of health workers, regular risk

assessments being undertaken at the workplace, and that risk mitigation measures are implemented.

The **mental health** of health workers should be promoted through psycho-education, creating a culture of compassionate leadership, and strengthening team coherence at all levels of the healthcare system.

When it comes to **social support**, health workers should be engaged about their needs, concerns and possible solutions. Probable priorities are child care, safe transport arrangements, and options for quarantining or isolation of health workers so that their families are protected.

Training and refresher training must be conducted to ensure the proper and safe management of patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19. The strategy also insists on regular training of healthcare workers on occupational health and safety.

It is tempting to cut corners on **communication** when the pressure of work is high. But taking time for communication is a precious investment. Daily debriefing sessions of working teams that take less than 15 minutes can focus attention on safety and help to ensure zero harm to patients and health workers. We are always stronger when we work in teams.

I have given you a taste of the strategy and you can find the full document by following our social media page which will provide

a link to our Knowledge Hub which contains various health and safety resources.

Thank you for joining this webinar and showing your interest in building our collective understanding of how to protect our health workers and reduce the risk of harm to patients. World Patient Safety Day 2020 is a tribute to all frontline healthcare workers, a recognition of your dedication and a statement of our intention to continually improve the protection available to you.

I thank you for listening and wish you fruitful discussions.

