

International Council of Nurses

2026 International Workforce Forum

Communiqué

3–4 February 2026

Introduction

The 2026 International Workforce Forum (IWFF), co-hosted by the International Council of Nurses (ICN) and the Japanese Nursing Association, was held in Yokohama, Japan, on 3–4 February 2026. The Forum was attended by nursing leaders from eight national nurses' associations (NNAs), representing a combined total of 3.7 million nurses across their countries. Women comprise 85% of the nursing workforce.

The Forum convened only days after the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) had stated, "One of the main reasons people miss out on health services is because they don't have access to a health worker. The world is facing a shortage of 11 million health workers by 2030, more than half of which is a shortage of nurses". This statement, made at the WHO Executive Board, was made soon after ICN and other members of the World Health Professions Alliance (WHPA) had written a [letter](#) to Dr Tedros supporting WHO's work and urging a continuing priority focus on investment in health professionals.

Nurses are increasingly in demand as a key solution in health workforce responses to the sustained rise in demand for health care, driven by the profound and lingering impact of COVID-19, growing and ageing populations,

increasingly complex health needs, including rising non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and the impacts of climate change and related natural disasters. It is evident that countries must heed the words of Dr Tedros, and address their nursing shortages as a matter of urgency. If this does not happen, the ability of many countries to meet Universal Health Coverage (UHC) goals will be undermined. The Forum focused on this central and serious shortage situation, and on identifying effective and coordinated responses to nursing workforce challenges, and concluded that further investment and strategy in nursing are required.

1. Shortage of nurses

The global population is ageing, and the number of people requiring nursing care is increasing. However, most countries are facing increasing difficulty in securing and retaining the necessary nursing workforce needed to meet this rising demand for care. The shortage gap, which is both numerical and skills based, is driven by several factors that have combined impact. These include increased levels of nurse retirements, linked to the ageing of the nursing workforce; the significant mental and physical impact of increasing and heavy workloads, which have been exacerbated in many health systems by the long-lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; inadequate remuneration relative to workload and responsibilities; and a lack of choice, autonomy, control, or career growth opportunities for nurses. Forum participants were also concerned about evidence of a reduced level of interest in nursing as a career, amongst potential entrants in some countries, linked to these issues of heavy workload, poor pay and limited career opportunities.

Budget constraints and the inability of some health systems to make addressing nursing shortages a necessary policy priority have further undermined effective responses. The ongoing shortage of nurses highlighted by the WHO Director General has raised concerns about the risk of ongoing cycles of low levels of retention, and the negative impact of nursing shortages on patient safety and the quality of care.

2. Safe staffing, skill mix and shift working for nurses

Participants reaffirmed that maintaining a safe and sustainable health care delivery system is critical to delivering and sustaining UHC, and requires systematic alignment of nurse staffing levels and mix with identified needs and demand for care. This means ensuring that there are sufficient nurses available now and into the future. This includes supportive policies to secure sufficient competent new nurses entering the field, as well as investment in the current workforce through provision of rewarding career structures and continued support for lifelong learning. It also requires proper planning and implementation of an appropriate skill mix within the nursing workforce, which prevents skill dilution and ensures patient safety.

Securing adequate nurses to provide safe care across the 24/7 demands of care delivery remains particularly challenging. There is now robust evidence of the detrimental effects of night shifts and shift work patterns on nurses' health, as well as the risks to patient safety, which must be reflected in the design of shift systems. In particular, for night shifts to be sufficiently staffed with professionally educated registered nurses, participants highlighted the urgent need for better working conditions, including monetary incentives for night shifts, shorter hours for night-shift staff, additional days off, and other compensations.

Significant evidence now exists in relation to the detrimental health impacts of night and shift working on nurses' health and also risks to patient safety and this must inform the design of shift systems.

3. International migration and mobility of nurses

The Forum raised significant concerns about the actions of some high-income countries which are under-investing in training and retaining their own nurses, and instead are "solving" their nurse shortages by high and sustained levels of active international recruitment. While international migration can be a relevant choice of career pathway for individual nurses, participants expressed serious concerns that the marked upward trend in increased active recruitment by high-income countries highlighted in recent OECD reporting is preventing some low- and middle-income countries to maintain and deliver even basic safe, accessible health services. IFFF representatives emphasized

the need for sustainable, ethical approaches to active international recruitment, and reaffirmed support for the *WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel*, but highlighted the need to strengthen its advocacy and implementation. They also called on governments to develop and implement long-term strategies for their domestic nursing workforce, as well as working internationally on resource provision and co-investment models that can improve the sustainability of nursing workforce employment in low income “source” countries.

4. Nursing in Primary Health Care

The Forum noted that, despite severe nurse shortages, nurses are expected to be at the core of health system responses to increased demand for health care in all countries. It highlighted that many countries are focusing on increased use of nurses in effective delivery of primary care to meet the demands of an ageing population and the growing need for responses to growth in incidence in NCDs. Participants underscored the growing importance and increased evidence of nurses serving effectively as community-based gatekeepers and coordinators in primary health care, advanced practice roles, exercising leadership in coordinating with health care providers and settings to ensure continuity of care.

The Forum highlighted the disparities in health care provision and resources between urban, rural and remote areas in all countries, and recognized that advanced practice nurses can be vital to safeguarding community and individual health, notably in underserved regions and communities. The Forum identified barriers to this necessary progress in the delivery of optimal and impactful primary care, linked to outdated legal and regulatory constraints, policy restrictions and long-standing outmoded traditions which are, impeding the expansion of, and access to, highly trained advanced practice nurses. Participants underscored the importance of reviewing and updating regulatory and legal frameworks and payment/reimbursement mechanisms to enable nurses to fully exercise their expertise in primary/community health care and contribute most effectively to individuals and communities.

5. Nurses' well-being

Recognizing that nurses are individuals with lives of their own, the Forum underscored the need to promote sound work environments that protect nurses' personal well-being while enabling them to strengthen their professional competencies and care most effectively for their populations. It focused on the significance of nursing professionals' well-being, for the nurses and for the health systems that they sustain. Building a society in which people can live independently as much as possible, requires nursing professionals to be enabled to fulfil their role in supporting and sustaining human life, living, and dignity, and in providing lifelong support that values individuality. Achieving this depends on ensuring that nurses can work in healthy, safe, and fulfilling conditions.

6. Violence and harassment against nurses

The Forum expressed serious concerns that violence, harassment, and aggression toward nurses and other health care workers is a growing challenge in many countries, which demands urgent and effective policy responses. This is necessary both to protect individual workers from harm, and to ensure that nurses can be supported and enabled to continue to deliver care. Harassment and violence seriously affect staff well-being, with mental health issues, injury, and burnout contributing to higher turnover of staff, and less workforce stability. Countries and international agencies must act to provide safe, secure working environments and robust safeguards. These include appropriate health, safety and security systems within health care services, sustaining safe staffing levels, and zero-tolerance workplace policies, as set out in the [*Charter. Health worker safety: a priority for patient safety*](#), published by WHO in 2020.

7. Fair wages and compensation

Nurses must provide safe health care around the clock, day and night, 365 days a year, to ensure that people receive the highest quality of care, have their individualized needs met and/or ensure people receive better care, enabling them to live life to their best, with peace of mind. Nurses must also

engage in lifelong learning to keep pace with evolving clinical practice and new technologies. Despite this, many nurses continue to receive low levels of pay which do not adequately reflect the value of their contribution or even provide a living wage, do not encourage their retention and career progression, and which often reflect continued gender-based discrimination.

Governments must put in place nurses' pay determination systems that ensure that remuneration fairly reflects the contribution and value of nursing as a profession, and which motivates nurses to remain in the profession. Pay levels must also reflect that many nurses currently face continuous and excessive workloads—including night shifts—without proper support or recognition of their expertise.

8. AI and digital transformation

Forum participants reported increased use of technologies such as information and communications technology (ICT) in supporting the delivery of care, notably, but not exclusively, in remote and rural areas, and highlighted the necessity of data-informed decision-making and service delivery. Participants were clear that nurses' work can be best supported when they are involved in the process of identifying and implementing new technologies, as well as then being trained to make best use of these technologies. However, concerns were raised that, without appropriate implementation and funding of new technologies, administrative burdens on nurses could increase, deflecting or diverting them from their core nursing duties underpinned by professional judgement.

Participants emphasized that, when introducing Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotics, and other technologies, nurses are ideally positioned to assess the real-world impact of AI-driven tools, contribute to post-market surveillance, and advocate for patient-centred, safe, and secure advanced technology adoption. They further stressed the importance of ensuring that employers guarantee the meaningful involvement of nurses in organizational decision-making on choice of technologies, implementation and staff training strategies, environmental arrangements, and related matters.

Additionally, participants also reaffirmed that the core professional and care giving aspects of nursing can never be replaced by AI or digital technologies,

and that securing high-quality talent is vital for optimizing the nursing workforce. This requires a framework for both initial nursing education and continuing professional development (CPD) that supports effective use of tech and AI.

Whilst technology and AI hold immense potential to improve access to health care, quality and outcomes, they also present very significant risks to confidentiality of patient information, public trust and the role of nurses. It is vital that nurses as implementers and users of technology and data are also included in AI and technology system design and implementation, decision making and the ethical and governance frameworks required to support new technologies and ways of working. As trusted health professionals, nurses should actively shape AI governance frameworks, develop regulatory standards, and drive ethical and practical integration of AI into health care.

9. Leadership

The Forum was in strong agreement that the presence of nurse leaders in policy development and implementation roles is indispensable. In this regard, participants highlighted the placement of Chief Nursing Officers (CNOs) in international organizations, national, and regional levels as a crucial mechanism for systematically reflecting the nursing perspective in health care policy and nursing workforce policies at all levels. Participants emphasized that this would not only promote people's health but also benefit society and have a positive impact on economic development. They further stated that CNOs play a vital role in demonstrating the added value nursing brings to society and in enhancing nurses' well-being.

Furthermore, participants noted that the presence of leaders within nursing practice settings contributes to improved patient outcomes, enhanced quality of care, and progress towards UHC. They underscored the importance of establishing comprehensive leadership development programmes to enable the continuous cultivation of nurses with leadership capabilities in policy, management, research, and related fields.

10. Investment

Nurses and nurse-led services and models of care are a key solution to address increasing health demands within the constraints that health systems operate. Without decisive measures concerning nurses' working conditions and remuneration, together with opportunities for basic nursing education, CPD, and leadership development, it will remain difficult to retain nurses and attract new entrants to the health care sector. As a result, nurse shortages will persist, undermining both the quality of patient care and nurses' well-being.

During the Forum, participants identified the urgent need for increased and better targeted investment in the nursing workforce as being essential for contributing to better global health and achieving UHC and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They also highlighted that such investment is vital for ensuring patient safety that contributes to people's health, sustaining health care systems, and serving as an important means of promoting economic growth. Participants urged governments to make appropriate investments grounded in long-term strategies that identify need for, and sustainable supply of nurses.

Working with WHO

NNAs reaffirmed their commitment to working with stakeholders and governments to accelerate investments in the nursing workforce, to promote co-investment support for low-income countries and to actively engage in efforts to strengthen the reliability of official data on the nursing workforce. This includes regularly updated data from the WHO [*State of the World's Nursing \(SoWN\)*](#) report, which serves as a key foundation for policy development, as well as ongoing data collection.

NNAs further recognized the importance of continuing to monitor and review progress on the necessary policy actions outlined in the WHO [*Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery 2021-2025*](#), (SDNM) which the World Health Assembly has approved for extension to 2030.

However, the Forum shared concerns that the current retrenchments of staff and reduced capacity at WHO risk undermining the ability of the

organization to maintain even basic levels of monitoring of nursing workforce data, trends and progress towards UHC and SDNM targets, and highlighted the fundamental need to maintain sufficient capacity in WHO, including sustaining the role of the WHO Chief Nursing Officer. It reaffirmed the CNO role is a critical enabler for advancing the profession, nationally, regionally and globally.

Conclusion

Nursing leaders participating in the Forum were unified in their commitment to support the attainment of UHC in all countries by combatting the increasing nursing shortage; improving investment in the nursing workforce; and implementing effective policy responses to persistent, heavy workloads, damaging working patterns, lack of career choice, and not being fully optimized as a professional. In particular, they agreed to work with governments and stakeholders to promote fair evaluation and wages—both of which, when inadequate, can hinder workforce retention—and to strengthen education, CPD, career development and leadership, while advancing the well-being of nurses.

The 2026 International Workforce Forum focused on national contexts, challenges, and strategies which help clarify and pinpoint what is required, nationally and internationally to sustain nurses and support health care delivery systems. ICN and nurses worldwide are committed to working with governments and all partners to implement these recommendations. Together, we can deliver lasting improvements in access, quality, equity, and health outcomes — powered by the full potential of the nursing profession