WHO News

Patient Safety: The international dimension

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In May 2002, the World Health Assembly passed Resolution WHA55.18 [1], which urged countries to pay the greatest possible attention to patient safety and requested the Director-General of the World Health Organization to carry out actions including: the development of global norms and standards; the promotion of evidence-based policies and mechanisms to recognize excellence in patient safety internationally; the encouragement of research on the subject; and to provide assistance to countries in several key areas.

In response to the recent resolution WHO has been able to bring together technical experts in areas such as blood safety, injection safety, vaccine safety, drugs and medicines, making pregnancy safer, medical devices, clinical procedures and nursing so that their individual expertise can be harnessed. New areas of activity have also been stimulated; for example, WHO's recent work with its European Office (EURO) on the prevention and control of hospital-acquired infections.

Tackling patient safety internationally requires a comprehensive multifaceted approach involving cultural change, system development and technical expertise.

Since the resolution was passed WHO has also initiated a number of work programmes concerned with systemic issues. In 2002 an International Consultation took place on estimating hazards. A tool for rapid assessment in data poor environments is now being developed. WHO is presently working with international experts to consider a way forward in relation to taxonomy. Later this year, following international debate and discussion, WHO will also issue guidelines for systems to report and learn from adverse events and errors.

During the recent May 2004 World Health Assembly, delegates from the 192 Member States heard reports on these technical programmes, highlighting for example:

- The success of the WHO programme for International Drug Monitoring, undertaken by WHO headquarters together with WHO Collaborating Centre for International Drug Monitoring in Uppsala, Sweden and 73 Member States. This programme ensures appropriate exchange of information on medicines and promotes pharmacoviligance in countries.
- The Injection Safety programme, which engages with countries to broaden the availability of single-use injection devices, safety boxes in health care facilities and proper management of waste associated with dirty syringes.
- The blood safety programme which facilitates Member States in the development of safe blood transfusion services (particularly ensuring appropriate processes and systems for collection, testing, processing and use of blood).

Later in 2004, WHO will launch an International Alliance for Patient Safety. The creation of the Alliance will be a significant step in the battle to improve patient safety in all countries. The Alliance will bring together policy makers, experts and agencies from all WHO Regions and Member States to deliver a number of core functions. Several working groups have already been established to consider what these functions might be. The groups encompass areas such as policy development and monitoring, research, solution development and reporting and learning.

A completely safe health care system is an ideal. In the medium term there are lives to be saved and harm to be avoided through a mixture of cultural change and technical development. Learning the lessons from things that go wrong and using that knowledge to make health care safer for future patients around the world is a realisable goal. It is one which should inspire and motivate all to achieve it.

Reference

[1] World Health Assembly Resolution WHA55.18. *Quality of care: patient safety*. www.who.intlgb/EB_WHAlPDFIWHA55/ ewha5518.pdf.