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Promote hand hygiene to save lives and combat COVID-19

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Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia talks about the role of hand hygiene in combatting COVID-19



Promoting good hand hygiene is one of the most basic yet powerful tools that Member States of the WHO South-East Asia Region must continue to leverage to reduce the spread of COVID-19. All Member States should urgently provide universal access to public hand hygiene stations as they embark on the next phase of the pandemic response, including at the entrance to every public or private commercial building and at all transport locations, especially major bus and train stations, airports and seaports. Regular and thorough hand-washing with soap or use of an alcohol-based rub are critical measures each of us can take to protect ourselves, each other and those who care for us: health workers.

As the world marks the annual WHO “SAVE LIVES: Clean Your Hands” campaign on 5 May, which is also the International Day of the Midwife, it is imperative that Member States continue to enhance hand hygiene in health care. Based on WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme global estimates, 35% of health facilities in the Region lack functional hand hygiene facilities at points of care and toilets. Effective infection prevention and control measures, including hand hygiene, are crucial to ensuring health facilities do not become hubs of COVID-19 transmission, and to reducing health care-associated infections from other pathogens, which account for an estimated 8 million deaths globally each year. Nurses and midwives in particular must be provided the resources and training required to implement good hand hygiene practices to respond to the pandemic and to safely maintain essential services.

There are several opportunities for Member States and health leaders in the Region to immediately scale up their support to nurses, midwives and other frontline responders to deliver clean care, for which they have WHO’s full technical and operational assistance.

First, all public and private health facilities should make functional hand hygiene stations readily accessible. Facility administrators should position hand hygiene stations at all points of care, in areas where personal protective equipment is put on or removed, where health care waste is handled, and within 5 metres of toilets. Hand hygiene stations must also be accessible at health facility entries and exits, and in waiting and dining rooms and other public areas.

Second, all health facilities should establish or strengthen hand hygiene improvement strategies. Facility administrators should provide refresher training on hand hygiene to nurses, midwives and other health workers. They should procure adequate quantities of good quality hand hygiene supplies. All staff must be encouraged to adhere to the “five moments for hand hygiene”, which are vital to protecting patient safety.

And third, health facility leaders should make hand hygiene a key quality monitoring indicator. Compliance with hand hygiene standards should be a core part of every health facility’s infection control regimen, with areas of risk identified and solutions found as a matter of priority. As part of this, all health facilities should sign up to and fully implement WHO’s global “SAVE LIVES: Clean Your Hands” campaign.

In this International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife, Member States in the Region must continue to support and strengthen the ability of nurses, midwives and other frontline responders to combat COVID-19, while also empowering the public to stop the spread and reduce the strain on health services. We are in this together and must get through it together. The health and well-being of the Region’s near 2 billion people is in all of our hands.