



**News Release WHO/50  
13 October 2005**

## **W.H.O LAUNCHES GLOBAL PATIENT SAFETY CHALLENGE; ISSUES GUIDELINES ON HAND HYGIENE IN HEALTH CARE**

**Geneva** - To fight the spread of health care-associated infections, which take a high toll in human lives and affect hundreds of millions of patients worldwide each year, the World Health Organization (WHO) and its partners are launching the Global Patient Safety Challenge with the theme, "Clean Care is Safer Care". As part of the launch, an advanced draft of the WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care is being made available, to encourage simple measures to prevent the spread of these infections.

Ministers of Health and senior officials, technical experts and WHO are today announcing a series of key actions to fight health care-associated infections, also known as nosocomial infections, which threaten hard-won gains in health and life expectancy. These infections are a global problem affecting both developing and developed countries.

According to a new publication of the Global Patient Safety Challenge, "Clean Care is Safer Care," at any given time, more than 1.4 million people worldwide become seriously ill from such infections. Between 5% and 10% of patients admitted to hospitals in developed countries acquire these infections, the report says. In some developing country settings, the proportion of patients affected can exceed 25%.

Added to the considerable human suffering is the economic impact of these infections. Studies in three OECD countries, one of which is a middle-income country, have shown that a total of 7.0-8.2 billion dollars are lost by the three countries every year because of health care-associated infections.

"WHO's World Alliance for Patient Safety has developed low-cost strategies to fight this global problem," said WHO Director-General Dr LEE Jong-wook. "Implementing these strategies is the best way to prevent health care-associated infection and improve patient safety."

The Global Patient Safety Challenge, a core programme of the World Alliance for Patient Safety, brings together the WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care (Advanced Draft) with ongoing actions on blood safety, injection and immunization safety, safer clinical practices, and safe water, sanitation and waste management. Simple actions contained in these low-cost strategies have also proven to be very effective in reducing the burden of infection.

Sir Liam Donaldson, Chair of the Alliance, Chief Medical Officer for England and Chief Medical Adviser for the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, said: "Patient safety is now recognized as a priority by health systems around the world. The Alliance's programme of work has brought an unprecedented level of commitment from countries, professional bodies and health consumers to the cause of making health care safer for patients. The first Global Patient Safety Challenge is addressing a vital area of risk. Health care-associated infection can be reduced and the prize is the potential saving of millions of lives worldwide".

For the past 12 months, more than 100 technical experts from around the world have participated in the development of WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care (Advanced Draft). The Guidelines will be finalized only after they have been tested in different health care settings in the six WHO regions. Hand hygiene, a very simple action, remains the primary measure to reduce health care-associated infection and the spread of antimicrobial resistance, enhancing the safety of care across all settings, from complex, modern hospitals to simple health posts.

In the case of a new influenza pandemic, the huge number of patients seeking care will pose a challenge to health services and greatly increase the risk of spread within health care facilities. The development of effective tools and resources to reduce transmission of pandemic influenza virus when providing health care is an immediate need. Although transmission by large droplets when people cough or sneeze is considered the major route of influenza spread, transmission via contaminated hands may be a contributing factor. Therefore, in addition to other infection control actions, hand hygiene measures suggested in the present guidelines should be included among the essential measures for responding to pandemic influenza.

The Global Patient Safety Challenge aims to assist countries as they incorporate "Clean Care is Safer Care" at the centre of their health agenda. It supports country efforts by raising awareness and commitment to prioritize responses to reduce health care-associated infection and promote preventive strategies. The Global Challenge is testing the implementation of the WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care in six specific districts of WHO regions worldwide as part of the integrated package of actions in the areas of blood safety, injection and immunization safety, safer clinical practices, and safe water, sanitation and waste management.

A number of countries have succeeded in controlling the problem of health care-associated infection and decreasing the risks to patients in their health facilities. However, not all countries have been successful. There is a gap between the patient safety improvements that are possible and the improvements that are actually being made. "The gap arises because existing tools and strategies are not being implemented wisely and widely," said Professor Didier Pittet, Leader of the Global Patient Safety Challenge and Director of the Infection Control Programme at Geneva's University Hospitals. "Whenever these strategies are used to prevent the spread of these infection, individual health settings can make dramatic progress."

The Global Patient Safety Challenge builds upon existing country efforts and initiatives to fight health care-associated infections. Reducing the spread of these infections will be a critical step towards enhanced and long term safety in health care.

---

For more information please contact Dr Agnès Leotsakos, World Alliance for Patient Safety, Tel: +41 22 791 2567, e-mail: [leotsakosa@who.int](mailto:leotsakosa@who.int)

All WHO News Releases, Fact Sheets and Features can be obtained on the WHO home page <http://www.who.int/>.