**WASH IN HEALTHCARE: A NEW GLOBAL HEALTH MOVEMENT**

**CENTERS OF INFECTION**

*"A healthcare facility without WASH is not a healthcare facility."*  
  - Dr. Maria Neira, Director of Public Health and Environment, World Health Organization

One of the most serious issues facing global health is also one of the most solvable. Facilities around the world are littered with broken wells, pumps, pipes, toilets and sinks that have fallen into disrepair. Others never had them — making it impossible for healthcare workers to stay safe and provide safe care. Without Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), healthcare facilities (HCFs) are Centers of Infection, not Centers of Healing.

Safe water, functioning toilets, and soap must be present in all hospitals and health clinics around the world in order to provide safe and dignified care; protect women and newborns during childbirth; prevent infections in patients and staff; carry out safe surgery; and prevent and contain pandemics and antibiotic resistance—issues that affect us all. And because the majority of healthcare workers and those utilizing healthcare services are women, the lack of WASH in HCFs disproportionately affects women.

In 2015, WHO/UNICEF first highlighted the widespread absence of WASH in HCFs in low- and middle-income countries, then issued the first baseline global assessment with data from 560,000 HCFs in 125 low- and middle-income countries ([JMP, 2019](https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/03-04-2019-1-in-4-health-care-facilities-lacks-basic-water-services-unicef-who)). The data is devastating:

* 2 billion people must rely on HCFs that lack basic water services
* 1.5 billion people must rely on HCFs without sanitation facilities
* 17 million women in Least Developed Countries give birth in HCFs without adequate WASH every year
* 45% of HCFs in Least Developed Countries lack basic water services
* 49% of HCFs in sub-Saharan Africa lack basic water services
* 21% of HCFs in the Least Developed Countries have no sanitation services
* ​64% of HCFs in Eastern and Southeastern Asia lack basic hygiene services
* Barely 25% of HCF plans in developing countries have a budget line item for WASH

The result is women in labor have to haul their own water, of questionable quality, to give birth in healthcare facilities that cannot be adequately cleaned. Umbilical cords are cut with dirty instruments on tables wiped down with dirty rags. Staff are on the frontlines of curing illness and stopping diseases and they can’t adequately wash their hands. Surgeons are asked to perform safe surgery under unsafe conditions.

**A FAST-GROWING MOVEMENT**

*"We must work to prevent the spread of disease.*

*Improved water, sanitation and hygiene in health facilities is critical to this effort."*  
- UN Secretary-General António Guterres on World Water Day 2018

Several dozen public and private organizations met in January 2018 in Washington, DC, and agreed to address this neglected global health crisis. Pushing from behind-the-scenes, an understanding of the landscape and sustainable solutions quickly picked up speed:

* **March 2018**: UN Secretary-General Guterres issued a global Call to Action to get WASH into all HCFs.
* **March 2019**: The Vatican, a major provider of healthcare, requested all HCFs affiliated with the Catholic Church evaluate and remedy gaps in WASH as part of the Vatican’s strategy for ensuring human development.
* **April 2019**: 40 of the largest faith-based organizations, representing more than 40% of healthcare in some regions, met to coordinate efforts to increase WASH in HCFs.
* **April 2019**: WHO/UNICEF released the [first global assessment](https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/03-04-2019-1-in-4-health-care-facilities-lacks-basic-water-services-unicef-who) and [recommendations for action](https://www.washinhcf.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2019_WASH-in-HCF-Practical-Solutions-for-Universal-Access-to-Quality-Care_2April-compressed.pdf).
* **May 2019**: The 194 Member States of the World Health Assembly unanimously passed a [resolution](https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA72/A72_R7-en.pdf) with clear practical steps for governments and partners to get WASH into HCFs worldwide.
* **June 2019**: The [‘What Women Want’](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5aa813dd3917ee6dd2a0e09e/t/5d1120ccdf7cbc0001b99c57/1561403606693/What-Women-Want_Global-Findings.pdf) survey of 1.2 million women and girls from 114 countries, revealed that WASH in HCFS was their 2nd highest ranking healthcare demand after dignity to improve reproductive and maternal health services.
* **June 2019**: Financial institutions, corporations, philanthropies, non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations and universities gathered in Washington, DC to announce historic [commitments](https://www.washinhcf.org/resource/summary-of-stakeholder-commitments-on-wash-in-health-care-facilities-june-2019/) for WASH in HCF, funding, technical assistance, research, training, maintenance and advocacy. The Colombian First Lady and the UN Secretary-General appeared by video. Commitments continue to grow and now total over 90 separate commitments.
* **September 2019**: Hosted by Zambia, WHO/UNICEF called [a meeting of national governments](https://www.washinhcf.org/resource/from-resolution-to-revolution-2019-global-meeting-report/) to help generate plans and support to achieve 100% WASH in HCF coverage by 2030.
* **January 2020**: [WHO cites](https://www.who.int/news-room/photo-story/photo-story-detail/urgent-health-challenges-for-the-next-decade) the absence of water, toilets, soap and waste management in HCFs among the most urgent global health challenges in the coming decade.

**SUSTAINABILITY IS KEY TO SUCCESS**

*"If you can't do the basics forget the rest. Prevention, prevention, prevention."*   
  - Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General, World Health Organization

The single most important challenge is sustainability. Sustainability requires leadership and coordination among water, health and finance sectors — local to global. Without sustainability, broken pipes, pumps, wells and more will rollback WASH efforts that make healthcare safer.

**FROM CENTERS OF INFECTION TO CORNERSTONES OF HEALING**

The challenge is great, but the logic and impact of making sustainable WASH second nature in every HCF is far greater. WASH into HCFs is a “force multiplier”, fundamental to achieving major healthcare objectives, with returns in improved health, economic stability and growth. Hundreds of millions of patients and tens of thousands of HCFs stand to benefit across Africa, Latin America and Asia.Countless lives will be saved as HCFs move from centers of infection to the cornerstone of healthier communities.

Where WASH in HCF leaders — local to global — take us in the months and years ahead is fundamental to the safety and dignity of global health everywhere.

**Learn more and share best practices, partnerships, news and events, and the growing list of actionable commitments being made to solve this solvable global issue:** [**www.washinhcf.org**](http://www.washinhcf.org).