

**PRESS
RELEASE**

Nurses' Work is Crucial for Achieving Equity in Health

Washington, DC, May 12, 2004 (PAHO)—The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) is carrying out a new initiative to support the work of nurses and midwives as part its efforts to promote greater equity in health.

Under the slogan of International Nurses' Day—"Working with the poor; against poverty" —the work is part of PAHO's commitment to the first Millennium Development Goal (agreed upon by 189 countries), which is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger from the world by 2015.

PAHO's efforts focus on professionalizing the work of nurses and midwives through basic and higher education programs, as well as continuing education and other training activities. It also aims at increasing the participation of nurses and midwives at the decision-making level, given that they represent 60 percent of human resources in health and are particularly critical in the area of primary health care.

The PAHO initiative will include an evaluation of nurses' and midwives' participation in health services delivery, and will disseminate successful experiences, for example, programs to support nurses working in rural areas in Chile and Bolivia.

Other areas of focus will include working conditions, nurses' growing work load, occupational safety problems, and low wages, among other problems.

According to PAHO data, there are 97 nurses for every 10,000 people in the United States. By contrast, the ratio in Haiti is 1 per 10,000. Although nursing remains a popular career choice, Latin America and the Caribbean face the problem of relatively low qualifications among their nursing personnel and increasing emigration of specialized personnel in search of better work opportunities.

In addition, there are significant inequalities in the geographical distribution of human resources in nursing, with the majority of nurses concentrated in major urban centers and hospitals.

In the United States, a major problem is the aging of nursing personnel. According to a PAHO work plan, roughly half of currently working nurses will no longer be in the workforce by 2010. This "could possibly influence the migration of nurses in less-developed countries," says the document.

Statistics from the World Bank show that nurses continue to be a pillar of the region's health care services: 90 percent of pediatric services and well-child care in Chile and 90 percent of mental health services in Belize are provided by nurses. In Nicaragua's Río Coco area, on the Atlantic Coast, 88 percent of outpatient visits are covered by nurses.

A World Health Organization (WHO) study of 3,100 hospitals showed that health centers with higher percentages of general nurses and higher ratios of nurses to patients have lower mortality.

International Nurses' Day commemorates nursing pioneering Florence Nightingale, born May 12, 1820, in Italy. Nightingale worked during the Crimean War, around 1850, but was much more than a heroine. She laid the groundwork for professional education of nurses as well as for new standards of nursing care and hygiene and nutrition in hospitals. Her writings continue to be read today, and her dedication to service and to science continues to provide a model for modern nursing.

PAHO was established in 1902 and is the world's oldest public health organization. PAHO works with all the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of its people. PAHO serves as the Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization (WHO).

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