

WHO launches medication safety plan

The Global Patient Safety Challenge on Medication Safety aims to address the weaknesses in health systems that lead to medication errors and the severe harm that results. The World Health Organisation (WHO) launched the global initiative to reduce avoidable medicine-associated harm in all countries by 50% over the next five years.

It lays out ways to improve the way medicines are prescribed, distributed and consumed, and increase awareness among patients about the risks associated with the improper use of medication.



Dr Margaret Chan, WHO director-general

Lack of good data

Medication errors cause at least one death every day and injure approximately 1.3m people annually in the United States of America alone. While low- and middle-income countries are estimated to have similar rates of medication-related adverse events to high-income countries, the impact is about twice as much in terms of the number of years of healthy life lost. Many countries lack good data, which will be gathered as part of the initiative.

Globally, the cost associated with medication errors has been estimated at \$42bn annually or almost 1% of total global health expenditure.

"We all expect to be helped, not harmed, when we take medication," said Dr Margaret Chan, WHO director-general. "Apart

from the human cost, medication errors place an enormous and unnecessary strain on health budgets. Preventing errors saves money and saves lives."

Both health workers and patients can make mistakes that result in severe harm, such as ordering, prescribing, dispensing, preparing, administering or consuming the wrong medication or the wrong dose at the wrong time. But all medication errors are potentially avoidable. Preventing errors and the harm that results requires putting systems and procedures in place to ensure the right patient receives the right medication at the right dose via the right route at the right time.

Causes

Medication errors can be caused by health worker fatigue, overcrowding, staff shortages, poor training and the wrong information being given to patients, among other reasons. Any one of these, or a combination, can affect the prescribing, dispensing, consumption, and monitoring of medications, which can result in severe harm, disability and even death.

Most harm arises from systems failures in the way care is organised and coordinated, especially when multiple health providers are involved in a patient's care. An organisational culture that routinely implements best practices and that avoids blame when mistakes are made is the best environment for safe care.

Four focus areas

The challenge calls on countries to take early priority action to address these key factors: including medicines with a high risk of harm if used improperly; patients who take multiple medications for different diseases and conditions; and patients going through transitions of care, to reduce medication errors and harm to patients.

The actions planned in the challenge will be focused on four areas: patients and the public; health care professionals; medicines as products; and systems and practices of medication. The challenge aims to make improvements in each stage of the medication use process including prescribing, dispensing, administering, monitoring and use. WHO aims to provide guidance and develop strategies, plans and tools to ensure that the medication process has the safety of patients at its core, in all healthcare facilities.

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