

# WMA STATEMENT ON HEALTHCARE INFORMATION FOR ALL

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## PREAMBLE

The WHO constitution states that “the extension to all people of the benefits of medical, psychological and related knowledge is essential to the fullest attainment of health”. Access to relevant, reliable, unbiased, up-to-date and evidence-based healthcare information is crucial for the public, patients and health personnel for every aspect of health, including (but not limited to) health education, informed choice, professional development, safety and efficacy of health services, and public health policy.

Lack of access to healthcare information is a major contributor to morbidity and mortality, especially in low- and middle-income countries, and among vulnerable groups in all countries.

Healthcare information is only useful if it is relevant, appropriate, timely, updated, understandable and accurate. It covers a broad spectrum of issues and refers to diseases, treatments, services, as well as the promotion and preservation of health.

Health literacy is a key factor in understanding how health services work and how to use them. Health professionals need access to adequate training and support to communicate with patients with low health literacy or with those who have difficulty understanding healthcare information, for example because of a disability.

Globally, thousands of children and adults die needlessly because they do not receive basic life-saving interventions. Some interventions may be available locally but are simply not provided due to indecision, delays, misdiagnosis and incorrect treatment. Failure to provide basic life-saving interventions more commonly affects those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

In the case of children with acute diarrhea, for example, the widespread misconception among parents that they should withhold fluids, and among health workers that they should give antibiotics rather than oral rehydration, contributes to thousands of unnecessary deaths every day worldwide.

Governments have a moral obligation to ensure that the public, patients and health workers have access to the healthcare information they need to protect their own health and the health of those for whom they are responsible. This obligation includes providing adequate education, in form and content, to identify and use such information effectively.

The public, patients and healthcare workers need easy, reliable access to evidence-based, relevant healthcare information as part of a learning process throughout the life-course to enhance understanding, and to make informed and conscious decisions about their health, healthcare options and the health care they receive. These groups need information in the right language, and in a format and technical level that is understandable to them, with relevant services signposted as appropriate. This should take into account the characteristics, customs and beliefs of the population to which it is directed, and a feedback process should be established. The public, patients and families need information that is appropriate to their specific context and situation, which may change over time. They need guidance on when and how to make important health decisions, which are usually best made when there is time to consider, understand and discuss the issue at hand.

Meeting the information needs of the public, patients and healthcare providers is a prerequisite for the realisation of quality universal health coverage and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).” UN SDG Target 3.8 on universal health coverage specifically aims to deliver ‘quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all’. Achieving this requires empowerment of the public and patients, as well as health workers, with the healthcare information they need to recognize and assume their rights and responsibilities to access, use and provide appropriate services and to prevent, diagnose and manage disease.

The development and availability of evidence-based, relevant healthcare information depends on the integrity of the global healthcare information system. This system comprises researchers, publishers, systematic reviewers, producers of end-user content (including academic publishers, health education, journalists and others), information professionals, policymakers, frontline health professionals and patient representatives, among others.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing this, the World Medical Association and its constituent members on behalf of their physician members, will support and commit to the following actions:

1. Promote initiatives to improve access to timely, current, evidence-based healthcare information for health professionals, patients and the public to support appropriate decision-making, lifestyle changes, care-seeking behaviour and improved quality of care – thereby upholding the right to health.
2. Promote standards of good practice and ethics to be met by information providers, guaranteeing reliable and quality information that is produced with the participation of physicians, other health professionals, and patient representatives.
3. Support research to identify enablers and barriers to the availability of healthcare information, including how to improve the production and dissemination of evidence-based information for the public, patients and health professionals, and measures to increase health literacy and the ability to find and interpret such information.
4. Ensure that health professionals have access to evidence-based information on diagnosis and treatment of diseases, including unbiased information on medicines. Particular attention should be paid to those working in primary care in low- and middle-income countries.
5. Combat myths and misinformation around healthcare through validated scientific and clinical evidence, and by urging the media to report responsibly on health issues. This includes the study of health-related beliefs stemming from cultural or sociological differences. This will improve the effectiveness of health promotion activities and allow the dissemination of healthcare information to be adequately targeted to different segments of the population.
6. Urge governments to recognize their moral obligation to take measures to improve the availability and use of evidence-based healthcare information. This includes:
  - resources to select, compile, integrate and channel scientifically validated information and knowledge. This should be adapted to target various different recipients;
  - measures to increase availability of healthcare information for healthcare workers and patients at health centres;
  - leveraging modern communication technology and social media;
  - policies that support efforts to increase the availability and use of reliable healthcare information.
7. Urge governments to provide the political and financial support needed for 'WHO's function to ensure access to authoritative and strategic information on matters that affect peoples' health', based on the WHO General Programme of Work 2019-23.