Patient safety

Patient safety relates to the prevention of errors or adverse effects to patients associated with healthcare. Global policy makers have acknowledged the necessity of ensuring patient safety is at the centre of health policy making. IAPO provides an overview of the global and regional policy landmarks in the field of patient safety, looking at them as a window of opportunity for patients to have a stronger say on this crucial issue.

Introduction

IAPO's Declaration on patient-centred healthcare states that every patient must have access to safe, appropriate, and quality assured services and treatments. If the principle of patient safety is not properly guaranteed in health policy and practice, no healthcare system can be said truly patient centric.

At global level, there seems to be strong consensus over the necessity of strengthening patient safety institutions and procedures. Patient advocates are called on to play a role in improving these mechanisms. The issue of patient safety is pivotal in determining the quality of every patient's healthcare journey.

Definition

Patient safety is one of the fundamental principles of healthcare. The World Health Organization (WHO) - Regional Office for Europe defines patient safety as "the prevention of errors and adverse effects to patients associated with health care". More specifically, the concept (and principle) of patient safety calls attention on the "system of care delivery that", as highlighted by Mitchell (2008),

(1) Prevents errors;
(2) Learns from the errors that do occur;
(3) Is built on a culture of safety that involves healthcare professionals, organizations, and patients.

In IAPO's perspective, the principle of patient safety has a dual applicability. First, it represents in itself one of the pre-condition of patient-centred healthcare. Second, it acquires even more importance when combined with other equally important principles, in that it imbues them with additional meaning and value.

For example, as reported by Vincent (2011), the Institute of Medicine identifies safety as the first of the six "aims for improvement" for which healthcare systems should strive to increase their **quality.** Equally, patient safety goes side by side with the principle of **access**, which was addressed in Policy Briefing #3. Access without safety is poor access. Whilst not sufficient, patient safety is a necessary condition for health systems to be said patient centric.

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Policy landmarks

In addition to providing a minimum definition of patient safety, the WHO has also undertaken over the years a number of initiatives to **promote patient safety globally.** In terms of policy and strategic development, a key milestone is represented by the Resolution WHA55.18, in which member states were urged to pay the "closest possible attention" to patient safety and establish "science-based" systems, "necessary for improving patients' safety and the quality of health care". The Resolution also requested the Director General to support countries in promoting a culture of safety by undertaking a number of strategic initiatives.

As far as key policy initiatives at regional level are concerned, the **58th WHO Regional Committee for Africa** adopted the document AFR-RC58-8 at the Regional Meeting held in 2008 in the Republic of Cameroon. The document starts by highlighting a number of context-specific challenges facing African patient communities and preventing them from improving patient safety in the continent. The document ends with a list of proposed actions aimed at tackling those challenges, which include refining national policies on health safety and undertaking awareness raising activities in the region.

In the **Eastern Mediterranean Region**, in 2005, the 52nd session of the WHO Regional Committee endorsed the regional strategy EM/RC52/4 for "enhancing patient safety" by urging member states to develop national standards for patient safety and promote partnership between national and regional "patient safety institutions".

In 2006, the **WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia** passed a resolution (SEA/RC59/R3) in which member states were urged to "engage patients, consumer associations, health care workers" and other stakeholders in "building safer health care systems and creating a culture of safety within health care institutions".

The lines of action pinpointed in the document CSP27/16 , which was approved by **the 27th WHO Pan American Sanitary Conference**, go along the same line in that they call for stronger citizen participation in "matters related to quality" and highlight the necessity for the quality of healthcare and patient safety to be made "sectoral priorities" in the Pan American Region.

Advocating for patient safety

As can be seen from this overview, the policy landscape at both global and regional levels appears to converge towards the acknowledgement of the importance of properly engaging patients and civil society in the process of strengthening patient safety institutions and mechanisms. It is therefore crucial that patients' organization seize this window of opportunity and establish themselves as key actors in this process..

One of the key global advocacy activities in the field of patient safety is represented by WHO's Patients for Patient Safety (PFPS), which was launched in London in 2005. The Programme's key objective is to build, increase, and strengthen a global network of patient advocates with the aim of making healthcare services "safer, more integrated and people centred for all".

IAPO's patient safety toolkit provides a systematic overview of the global patient safety issues and discusses the key advocacy activities that patient groups can consider undertaking in order to favour the establishment of strong patient safety frameworks. The three hey activities are:

- **Advocate.** Patients can play a central role in improving patient safety globally by advocating for higher-quality involvement at all levels of decision making and calling key healthcare stakeholders' attentions on specific patient safety issues.

- **Educate.** Patient safety incidents can be minimised by providing patient communities with high-quality, fit-for-purpose information. Patient information must also be aimed at increasing patients' understanding of what they can practically do to ensure appropriate safety standard are in place.

- **Raise awareness.** Patients' voice must be heard clear and loud! Patient safety is an issue that concerns the healthcare system as a whole and all of its stakeholders. It is therefore paramount that advocacy messages are shaped in appropriate ways according to what channel is used and what audience is targeted. Impact will only be high if patient advocates are entirely clear as to:

(1) What they are calling for;
(2) Who they are targeting.

How to move forward

IAPO is committed to continuing working within the PFPS framework to ensure that its members' voice is listened to in global policy making arenas and that patient safety is placed at the centre of future health policy developments.