Open Letter from medical and public health professionals on the Plastics Treaty 4th Negotiation Meeting (INC-4)

April, 2024

Distinguished Delegates and Chair of the International Negotiation Committee for a Plastics Treaty,

As health professionals who have taken an oath to the ethical principle to first do no harm, we are committed to health and well-being for all. Plastic poses an ongoing crisis for human and planetary health, which will inevitably worsen with the planned dramatic increase in plastics production, unless global action is taken.

We urge delegates to commit to a just and equitable Treaty that respects human rights, limits the production of plastics, eliminates unnecessary plastics products including single use plastic, prioritizes detoxification, and ensures transparency of plastic products and materials. Actions throughout the full life cycle of plastics is necessary to eliminate the harmful effects from production, use, recycling, and disposal of plastics and to protect human and planetary health.

We call on delegates to develop an ambitious and just Treaty to end plastic pollution, including in the health sector. The health sector requires special consideration in the Plastics Treaty, not an exemption. A blanket exemption is inconsistent with the health mission of the sector, and would inhibit innovation and momentum for plastics reduction, reuse, and redesign. It is contrary to growing global efforts for a sustainable health sector.

Plastics have become ubiquitous in healthcare, with a dramatic shift towards single-use items in recent decades (e.g. tubing, examination gloves, catheters, intravenous infusion devices, transfusion sets, diagnostic equipment, gowns, etc). However, many non-essential uses of plastics in the health sector can be eliminated, including non-medical applications (e.g. maintenance, food, interiors, office). Essential uses of plastics can often be detoxified and designed for reuse.

Therefore, we appeal to governments to consider a program of work on plastic products in the health sector, to be further developed, in alignment with other international initiatives on health and chemicals, wastes, greening the supply chain and climate.

There are health impacts at each stage of the plastics life cycle. Plastics used in health care require thousands of hazardous additives (including carcinogens, neurotoxicants, endocrine disruptors) that can leach from products and waste, and persist in the environment, threatening patients, communities, workers (including waste workers), and ecosystems.

Exposure to hazardous chemicals from plastic is a particular concern for vulnerable patients including fetuses, newborns, and young children. This toxicity and chronic exposure represents a significant burden of care for the health system around the world. In addition, the lack of full product ingredient information impedes efforts to reuse, recycle, and to move to safer alternatives. Transparency and traceability of hazardous chemicals in healthcare products and articles is therefore essential to speed up the redesign and detoxification of plastic products.
Plastics, and their chemical additives are primarily made from petrochemical feedstocks. Reducing our dangerous dependence on fossil fuel-based plastics will help limit global warming and the further degradation of the planet's ecosystems. Failing to do so will lead to dire health consequences, and the loss of key natural resources and ecosystem services critical to both human and non-human species health, undermining One Health and planetary health.

Communities, health workers and health systems already face the alarming impacts of plastics production and pollution. The worst impacts of plastics' production and disposal are not equally distributed, but instead are concentrated in the most vulnerable and under-resourced communities. The treaty should uphold the universal right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, and address the human rights impacts of each stage of plastic production and waste management.

We welcome the resolution WHA76.17 and the report by the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), which recognize the health sector's "critical role and unique expertise to contribute to the sound management of chemicals and waste and protecting from their harmful impacts on health and well-being". From reusable textiles and medical devices, to the elimination of unnecessary single use products, health care providers are transforming the sector and have a critical role to play in reducing the public health threat by addressing plastic use and seeking safer alternatives.

We cannot rely on false solutions like chemical recycling that extends unsustainable plastic use and reliance on fossil fuels, which do not generate real health improvements. Only a significant reduction in plastic production and use can do that.

As doctors, nurses, researchers, health care professionals, and associations, we have a moral and professional obligation to prevent harmful exposures to hazardous chemicals from plastics in the health sector. We commit to continuing action to protect human health, and urge your commitment to a Treaty that strongly supports health, human rights and justice. A Treaty that protects the planet is also a Treaty that protects our patients.

Sincerely,

- Health Associations
- Health care facilities and systems
- Health professionals
- Other supporting organizations