



## Global Surgery and Anaesthesia Partners Statement

*“Strengthening Emergency and Essential Surgical Care and Anaesthesia as a Component of Universal Health Coverage.”*

Surgery has a crucial role to play in achieving universal health coverage and fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals. Sustainable provision of surgical care and anaesthesia is a critical part of integrated primary health care. Access to safe emergency and essential surgery lowers mortality and morbidity from neglected surgical diseases, reduces death and disability from birth defects, reduces economic and social disparities, and prevents adverse health outcomes arising from the burden of injuries and non-communicable diseases.

In most high-income countries, surgery and anaesthesia are integrated as part of the basic continuum of care. However, throughout much of the developing world, surgical care remains a neglected but critically needed component of universal health coverage. When access to safe essential surgeries is deficient, easily treatable surgical conditions can lead to devastating lifelong disability, social exclusion, economic hardship, and even death. This is the reality for over a third of the global population, which lacks access to basic, cost-effective and life-saving surgical procedures to treat simple conditions such as obstructed labor, maternal hemorrhage, congenital birth defects such as clubfoot and cleft lip, traumatic injuries and accidents, soft tissue infections, and hernias.

Over 30 years ago, Dr. Halfdan Mahler, Director-General of the WHO, delivered a speech recognizing the importance of surgery as a component of primary health care stating: "Without it, in spite of preventive measures...people will not have faith in primary health care...people in need *must* have access to skilled surgical care at first-line referral hospitals...Yet the vast majority of the world's population has no access whatsoever to skilled surgical care and little is being done to find a solution."

Surgically treatable conditions contribute to the global burden of disease, with conservative estimates suggesting that over a tenth of the world's Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) are caused by surgical disease. Africa and Southeast Asia alone account for over half of the burden of illnesses and conditions that could be treated through basic surgical care. However, access to surgical care is often stifled by a lack of resources, infrastructure, training and health care provider capacity. Additionally, meaningful and reliable metrics of access to high quality safe surgery and anaesthesia are needed for assessment and monitoring, and to foster political and public support.

Another important barrier to the delivery of surgical services and anaesthesia is the perception that surgery is resource intensive, costly, and a relatively low priority issue for national health policy. Yet surgical care can be delivered more cost-effectively than is generally appreciated. A rural surgical service in Bangladesh costs approximately US\$10 per DALY averted, a third of the cost per DALY averted for measles vaccinations, and 10-15 times less than the cost of antiretroviral medication for HIV treatment. For each dollar spent strengthening surgical capacity, an additional ten dollars is generated through improved health and productivity. From an economic perspective, investing in surgical care represents a simple, cost-effective and attainable universal health coverage strategy.

As awareness about the role of surgery in primary and universal care grows, so does the opportunity for global entities to support programs and efforts that will increase access to safe surgical care. Large-scale solutions are possible if major policy actors, national governments and health donors recognize and prioritize surgery as an essential component of universal health coverage.

In 2008, Dr. Paul Farmer, Founder of Partners in Health, and Dr. Jim Kim, President of the World Bank, famously described surgery as the “neglected stepchild of global health.” Since this time, modest progress has been recorded. Over two billion people still lack access to basic surgical care with a quarter of all operations being delivered to the world’s poorest countries where 70% of our global population is concentrated. The poor continue to suffer because of a shortage of skilled personnel, inadequate infrastructure, and high out of pocket costs that invariably push the most destitute to even greater depths of poverty.

However, there is hope. There is increasing recognition of the critically important role that surgery and anaesthesia play in preventing death and alleviating disability worldwide. A globally supported WHA resolution focused on improving access to safe essential surgery and anaesthesia represents an important step towards saving and improving the lives of million. In support of this objective, the WHA Executive Board recently reviewed and unanimously passed a technical agenda item on “Strengthening Emergency and Essential Surgical Care and Anaesthesia as a Component of Universal Health Coverage” (WHA EB Meeting, May 26, 2014), making it possible for a global surgery resolution to be introduced at the 68<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly in May 2015.

As stated by Dr. Kim in a recent address to the Lancet Commission on Global Surgery, we are all invited to “challenge this injustice, and to build a shared vision and strategy for global equity in essential surgical care...(making) the case that surgery is an indivisible, indispensable part of health care.”

More than ever, it is now time to join together to extend the sense of urgency in global public health beyond communicable diseases; to the diseases and injuries which in modern times can easily be treated by surgical and anaesthesia health providers working at the first-referral facility in under-resourced countries. Let government, civil society, professional associations and the private sector unite to call for:

- Recognizing surgical care and anaesthesia as an integral component of primary health care and universal health coverage
- Strong political leadership and support from champions dedicated to improving access to safe and cost-effective surgery and anaesthesia in low-resource settings
- Predictable, adequate funding from international and local sources targeted to support surgical capacity building and to expand access to care
- Technological innovation and global collaboration to support workforce training and to strengthen capacity for delivery of safe essential surgical care and anaesthesia
- Development of a universally accepted package of basic surgical services and public health interventions to address the unmet burden of surgical disease
- Effective use of evidence and metrics to track progress in surgical care provision
- Strong local leadership and healthcare governance to implement strategic policy, provide oversight, build coalitions and support robust surgical health systems

While ensuring universal access to surgical care and anesthesia will not be easy – it is certainly possible, especially when we join forces as providers, researchers and policymakers. Together, we can build greater momentum and set the direction of a public health movement that has already realized dramatic progress over the past decade. We can and must ensure that each and every individual can have access to safe and high quality surgical care and anaesthesia at the primary health care level.

In preparation for the 2015 introduction of a WHA global surgery resolution, we encourage all stakeholders to join in advocacy efforts by reaching out to national government representatives, professional associations, and leaders within the field to advocate for surgery and anaesthesia as critical components of universal health coverage.