

WaterAid Nepal

WASH in Healthcare Facilities A critical but neglected area in COVID-19 situation



The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic first started in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and has spread rapidly across the globe. Considering this as a global threat, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International concern on 30 January, 2020 and later announced the disease as pandemic¹ on 11 March, 2020. Well-trained frontline health workers, with adequately equipped healthcare facilities (HCFs), are vital in treating patients and advising them on good hygiene to control the spread of COVID-19 through effective Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) procedures.

To enable the health workers to perform their jobs in a safe manner and to protect the patients, healthcare facilities must have water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. [WHO recommendation for all Member States on COVID-19](#) includes prioritizing hygiene promotion and WASH in healthcare facilities. 2019 [World Health Assembly Resolution on WASH in healthcare facilities urged countries](#) to address the issue and the 2020 World Health Assembly has again reinforced this urgency.

In Nepal

7% of HCFs do not have water services
8% of HCFs do not have sanitation services
54% of HCFs do not have handwashing facilities available at point of care.

[WHA73 COVID-19 response resolution](#) calls on Member States, in the context of COVID-19 (paragraph 7.4):

“to take measures to support access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene, and infection prevention and control, ensuring that adequate attention is paid to the promotion of personal hygienic measures in all settings, including humanitarian settings, and particularly in health facilities.”

Public healthcare facilities are key institutions playing an essential role to stop the spread of COVID-19. Clean healthcare facilities with a safe environment increase the trust and demand for healthcare services, strengthen staff morale and performance, and highlight the staff as a role model for the community to set good hygiene norms and behaviours.

Standards and guidelines on WASH in healthcare facilities strengthen the public health system across the country and serves as a model to be followed by the local government. It not only keeps the healthcare workers and patients healthy by reducing the risk of infections, but is also very critical for the prevention of healthcare associated infections to newborn babies and mothers around the time of birth.

¹ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>

There is no doubt that WASH in healthcare facilities are prerequisites to provide quality health services and people-centered care.

Constitution of Nepal 2072, article 35 (d) states 'Every citizen has the right to access safe water and sanitation'. This clearly shows that access to water and sanitation is not an exception to healthcare facilities. According to Nepal Public Health Act 2075- Sub-section (2) of Section 16, it is obligatory that every healthcare facility should adopt necessary safeguards for the prevention of disease and contamination (sanitation and hygiene and Infection prevention and control).

Section 41 on Sanitation and Waste Management depicts that sanitation is linked with cleanliness. This section explains mainly two things about WASH- i) collection and management of clinical waste and standard related to pollution; and ii) availing safe drinking water at healthcare facilities².

As WHO and the Ministry of Health and Population have made clear in public health advice, one of the main preventive measures for controlling the global spread of COVID-19 (and indeed any infectious disease outbreak) is to wash hands frequently with soap and water. Health workers also need to wash their hands at critical times as determined by WHO while dealing with any patient and before wearing PPE and after removing PPE. Management Division, Department of Health Services has been taking the lead in the development of National Standards on WASH in healthcare facilities since 2017 which clearly depicts WASH standard for HCFs such as:

- A functional water collection point and water use facility should be available to allow convenient access to water for drinking, handwashing, toilets, personal hygiene, food preparation, laundry, cleaning, gardening and medical purposes.
- Drinking water should be made available to staff, caregivers and patients, including children and people with limited mobility (every story of multi-story building), at all times.
- Adequate functional and accessible improved sanitation facilities for health care workers, support staff, patient and caretakers.
- Functional hand hygiene facilities which are available in all critical areas such as OPD, IPD, Emergency, waiting area, lab, maternity unit and all toilets.
- Accessible hand washing facilities for child and person with limited mobility in or nearby toilets, and waiting area, maternity unit.

Amidst COVID-19 and other emergent priorities, we urge the Ministry of Health and Population to quickly finalize the National Standards on WASH in Health Care Facilities and to drive its implementation across Nepal. Furthermore work with the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Health and Population to ensure sufficient budget allocation for improvements to WASH infrastructure and operation and maintenance costs within healthcare facilities.

For more information, please contact
Upama Adhikari Tamang
 Senior Health & hygiene Co-ordinator
 UpamaAdhikariTamang@wateraid.org



² Indirectly related to sanitation hygiene, for instance Section 25 talks about the standard of services to be provided by health institution, which definitely talk about cleanliness and contamination free treatment; Section 27 is about monitoring of the quality of the services provided by Health Institutions