Foundations of health:
How lack of water, sanitation and hygiene is putting lives at risk in healthcare facilities across West Africa

Nobody goes to a healthcare facility to get sick. Yet, millions of people across West Africa are risking infection and diseases when they seek care because their doctors and nurses don’t even have clean water to wash their hands.

A lack of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in healthcare facilities compromises the dignified and inclusive care of patients, and the safety of healthcare workers – a reality that is unacceptable and avoidable.

As the region battles a second wave of COVID-19, frontline healthcare workers and patients must be protected. We are calling for governments to take urgent action by investing in WASH infrastructure and promoting hygiene behaviour in healthcare facilities.

Salimata (above), has worked as a Matron at Talo Health Centre in Segou Region, Mali, for ten years, and has seen it change dramatically over that period. When Salimata first started working at the facility, it had no water on-site. This meant that the staff couldn’t wash their hands, their equipment or their treatment rooms without collecting water from a local well.

Without the availability of water, Salimata faced big challenges in her role and felt the risk of exposure to infectious diseases. Now, the health centre has clean water, handwashing stations and decent toilets, which has transformed the level of safety and care for the staff and their patients.

“I really feel a lot better now. When I work, I do not fear infections, because we have portable water and soap to wash our hands properly and clean our materials and spaces.”

Salimata used to collect water for the health centre from an open well in the village.
**What is the problem?**

A safe environment with good hygiene, access to clean water and adequate sanitation are essential for the protection of healthcare staff, patients and their caregivers. However, there are currently major gaps in basic WASH services in healthcare facilities in the least developed countries around the globe:

- 1 in 4 lack hand hygiene facilities at points of care.
- 1 in 2 lack basic water services.
- 3 in 5 do not have decent toilets.

Whilst significant data is missing, it is clear that some of the lowest rates of WASH in healthcare facilities in the world are in the West Africa region. Shockingly, **54% of healthcare facilities** in Nigeria, the largest economy on the continent, do not have a clean source of water on site.

In Sierra Leone, despite the re-building of the health systems following the devastation caused by Ebola, **79% still lack this essential lifeline.**

**Why is this important?**

This presents a critical weakness in health systems – a fundamental flaw in our collective armour for global health security. The global COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that in an interconnected world, a health crisis that threatens one community, now threatens us all.

Effective WASH and infection prevention and control (IPC) measures reduce the spread of diseases, like COVID-19, and curb millions of infection-related deaths each year. Without it, increased infections can result in prolonged hospital stays, long-term disability, increased antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and growing healthcare costs for families and health systems. Both inadequate WASH and high infection rates can also damage patients’ trust in health systems and their willingness to seek care, which in turn can reduce health workers’ safety, morale, attendance and retention – putting more lives at risk.

“A healthcare facility without WASH is not a healthcare facility.”

Dr Maria Neira, Director of Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health, World Health Organization (WHO)

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**Figure 1: Basic water access in healthcare facilities.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% Access</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea-Bissau</td>
<td>74%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<td>53%</td>
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<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>21%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
What have we learnt from the rapid spread of COVID-19? What have we learnt from the Ebola crisis? Diseases spread fast in the absence of clean water, decent sanitation and good hygiene. Governments need to put these lessons into action. Despite the threats of COVID-19, action on scaling up WASH in healthcare facilities is lagging. This must be a top priority in ensuring healthcare for all.”

WaterAid West Africa
Interim Regional Director,
Abdul-Nashiru Mohammed

What needs to happen now?

Our leaders have already pledged for this to change. In 2019, all Health Ministers at the 72nd World Health Assembly (WHA) agreed to take action to ensure every healthcare facility has access to WASH through the adoption of a global resolution. However, from the progress report released by WHO and UNICEF in December 2020, it is clear that some major gaps remain.

We specifically call for governments in West Africa to:

- **Urgently increase investment in WASH services and infrastructure in healthcare facilities** as an emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting with fully costed national action plans.
- **Scale up hygiene promotion and training** for all frontline health workers, including cleaners and auxiliary staff through enhanced behaviour change campaigns.
- **Embed WASH indicators into routine health monitoring mechanisms** and review progress.
- **Embed WASH in healthcare facilities into routine health system strengthening**, including operations, planning and financing, especially for COVID-19 recovery efforts.

To find out more go to: washmatters.wateraid.org/water-sanitation-and-hygiene-in-healthcare-facilities

For an overview on the state of hygiene in West Africa, see our report: Regional state of hygiene – West Africa

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WaterAid is an international not-for-profit, determined to make clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene normal for everyone, everywhere within a generation. Only by tackling these three essentials in ways that last can people change their lives for good.

References