Congressional Briefing on the Need for Surgical Care in Low-Resource Settings

Global surgical care intersects with all known disease categories and all demographics and is a critical component of addressing universal health coverage and health systems strengthening.

Essential surgical services address surgical diseases that are largely neglected, including obstructed labor, congenital diseases, cataracts, hernias, and basic surgical care for injuries, emergencies, and consequences of infectious diseases. These conditions continue to represent a public health challenge that disproportionately impacts the most marginalized individuals in society with the greatest impact on women, children, and the world’s most vulnerable populations.

The sustainable provision of safe surgical care and anesthesia is essential to strengthening health systems and will decrease premature mortality and avoidable disability resulting from surgical diseases. In turn, access to such care reduces economic and social disparities and prevents disability, deformity and other adverse health outcomes arising from injuries and non-communicable diseases.

Surgical care is needed for nearly all disease categories and in all age groups and socioeconomic strata. It is an integral component of health systems and is an essential component of ensuring Universal Health Coverage (UHC). Surgical, obstetric, trauma and anesthesia care has a crucial role to play in fulfilling Millennium Development Goals 1,3,4, 5 and 6 and the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Today, approximately 2 billion people have no access to surgical care, representing a crisis of global proportions. Lack of access to safe and timely surgical care results in more deaths and disability than HIV/AIDS or malaria. Encompassing obstetrics, anesthesia, congenital deformities, noncommunicable diseases and trauma care, this lack of access to care contributes to 11-15% of the global burden of disease, affects 1 in 7 marginalized persons in the world, intersects with all known disease categories, and places an immense burden on health systems.

The African continent, with a population of 1.1 billion, has 1% the number of surgeons practicing as the United States, with its population of 314 million. In high-income countries, there are more than 14 operating rooms per 100,000 people—by contrast, there is an average of one operating room per 100,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa.

Pulse oximeters, essential equipment to ensure safe surgery and a necessary component of operating rooms, are lacking in as many as 77,000 operating rooms globally. This amounts to more than 30 million operations worldwide performed without basic safe monitoring.
Lack of access to essential medical and surgical instruments as well as inadequate sterilization and infection control capacity lead to a post-operative infection rate that reaches up to 45% in some low-resource countries.\(^7\)

Basic surgical interventions save lives and prevent permanent disability and life-threatening conditions, which in turn improve economic outcomes and development.

The links between newborn and maternal survival and access to quality surgery are clear. It is estimated that one in three pregnant women will require a medical or surgical intervention during birth, and between 5% and 15% will require a caesarean section.\(^8\) Investments and scale-up of obstetric surgery and anesthesia care are critical to close the gap in maternal and infant mortality.

Surgical services are increasingly becoming recognized as a highly cost-effective strategy for strengthening health systems in low-resource settings. Strengthening essential surgical services also directly contributes to sustainable development. A recent United Nations report found that for every $1 spent on strengthening local surgical capacity, $10 was generated through enhanced health and increased productivity.\(^9\)

As the world begins to shift its focus towards the post-2015 sustainable development goals, it is critical that access to safe, quality essential surgical care is prioritized as part of the global development agenda.

We are at a critical moment in time. Strengthening the ability of health systems to provide essential surgical care is also gaining significant global support. On January 29, 2015, the World Health Organization’s Executive Board unanimously adopted a resolution on strengthening surgical care and anesthesia as a component of universal health coverage. The United States is a cosponsor of the resolution and will promote the adoption of the Resolution at the World Health Assembly in 2015. As Secretary Sylvia M. Burwell, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said, “surgical care is a neglected but efficacious addition to a basic package of health services, particularly in pursuit of universal health coverage.”

This is an opportune time to take advantage of this momentum. Please join us.

**Call to Action:**

1. **Share this information** with your representative and help advocate for greater prioritization of essential surgical care as an integral component of universal health coverage and health systems strengthening.
2. Encourage your representative or organization to **sign the petition online** supporting the Global Alliance for Surgical, Obstetric, Trauma, and Anaesthesia Care: [http://www.theg4alliance.org/petition/](http://www.theg4alliance.org/petition/)
3. Identify opportunities to **partner with the G4 Alliance and ReSurge to advocate for surgical care** as it relates to US policy, particularly:
   - Maternal health;
   - Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease;
   - Disaster and emergency response;
   - Trauma care and burn management;
   - Workforce training and capacity building.

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