ABSTRACT: The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) jointly developed policy guidelines for improving health workers’ access to HIV and TB prevention, treatment, care and support services. These 14-point policy guidelines support the key principles of the International Labour Standard concerning HIV and AIDS in the world of work adopted in 2010. The joint guidelines cover issues on workers’ rights, national legislation and social protection of health workers. In addition, the guidelines provide framework for workplace policies, programmes, and training. To ensure proper implementation, the guidelines also addressed issues of budget, monitoring and evaluation. Turning these policy guidelines into effective practice would require advocacy to both the health and labour sectors, as well as the recognition of the important roles of health workers, employers of health services, and that of the Ministries of Health and Ministries of Labour.

The health sector has a vital responsibility in helping realize people’s fundamental rights to health. The health services employers and management must protect the health and rights of their own workers in order to ensure the public could benefit from optimal health services.

Many countries are currently facing a severe shortage in their health workforce. Increasing workloads of the personnel in healthcare facilities and resource-constrained working conditions lead to great challenges in recruitment and retention of qualified health workers. This situation is further aggravated in countries that are particularly affected by dual epidemics of Human immunodeficiency virus and Tuberculosis. The high rate of HIV-TB co-infection in these countries drives an increasing demand on health services. It also increases the HIV and TB burden on health workers who are particularly exposed to both infections on a daily basis in their work environment.

Although health workers are at the frontline of responding to HIV and TB care needs of people, they have to deal with their own fears of contracting both HIV and TB because of their work exposures. The situation is aggravated by the fact that health workers themselves do not have adequate access to HIV and TB services. They face stigma and discrimination as well as loss of their employment, in the events they become infected.

In response to this situation, the ILO and WHO jointly developed a 14-point HIV-TB policy guidelines on how to ensure the access of all health workers to HIV and TB prevention, treatment, care and support services. The guidelines have a solid base of evidence resulting from systematic literature reviews, studies of current practices in 21 countries, and international expert consultations organised by both the WHO and ILO.

Figure 1: Collaboration between WHO and ILO on protecting health workers from occupational exposure to biological hazards
The purpose of the guidelines is to give coherence to a compilation of existing clinical and policy guidelines to improve health workers’ access to HIV and TB prevention, treatment, care and support services. Moreover, the new guidelines fill in the gaps of previous guidelines, for instance they address specifically need to protect health workers from contracting TB in the workplace and the need for TB infection control.

The target audience of the new policy guidelines are policy makers in the ministries of health and of labour; public and private health sector employers and senior management; occupational and infection control practitioners; all health workers, their associations or unions.

The joint guidelines cover:
- national frameworks including rights, other legislation and social protection schemes;
- workplace actions including policies, programmes and training;
- budget, monitoring and evaluation involving national and workplace coordination;

In line with the 2006 WHO World Health Report, the 2010 joint ILO-WHO guidelines are based on a broad definition of “health workers” which includes the providers of health services such as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, laboratory technicians, as well as management and support workers in healthcare settings such as finance officers, administrators, cooks, drivers, cleaners and security guards. The policy guidelines cover health workers employed at all types of facilities, including acute-care, long-term care, community-based care, home-care and informal caregivers or providers of health services in other sectors.

The guidelines illustrate for the health sector the fundamental rights and principles contained in the ILO Recommendation concerning HIV and AIDS and the World of Work, 2010, No. 200, by promoting, among others:
- workers’ rights;
- gender equity;
- the active participation of health workers, their representatives and health sector employers;

The guidelines aim to protect health workers and empower them to respond to the threat of HIV and TB infections. Implementing these guidelines could improve retention of health workers and prevent the loss of health workforce due to infection with HIV, TB, other infections or death.

The guidelines complement and reinforce guidelines previously developed by WHO and ILO on TB infection control and HIV in the workplace10, health-systems strengthening11, post-exposure prophylaxis12,13, clinical diagnoses and treatment for HIV and TB14,15, reproductive health16,17, and occupational health18,19.
The involvement of people living with HIV or TB; prevention; effectiveness and efficiency.

The joint policy guidelines have been agreed to by the tripartite constituents of ILO and approved by the Guidelines Review Committee of WHO. The guidelines were adopted by the Governing Body of the ILO in November 2010. They are officially launched as part of the World AIDS Day celebration 2010. WHO and ILO encourage all their global partners to disseminate and implement this set of guidelines. For instance, to incorporate the joint ILO-WHO policy guidelines for health workers into the International Hospital Federations’ Positive Practice Environment campaign.

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