

A non-toxic health sector to ensure a safe and healthy planet for all



Position statement on the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM)

Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) has prepared this position statement¹ on the importance of the successor agreement to the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM)², its contribution to the sound management of chemicals and waste, the importance of health to chemical safety, and the role that the health sector plays in SAICM. The SAICM forum is critical to the health sector because it is the only multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder process that brings together health care providers, environmental advocates, labor unions, and other stakeholders, and allows civil society to speak with an equal voice. Because toxic chemicals endanger human health, we believe the health sector must be more deeply engaged in policy development and implementation on the sound management of chemicals, both within the sector and as a strong voice advocating for action in all sectors. Health Care Without Harm has a long history of work in the sector to demonstrate best practice in addressing chemical safety (see [Annex 1](#)).

Chemical pollution has created a health crisis that costs lives and threatens economies

SAICM's objective, "to achieve the sound management of chemicals throughout their life cycle so that, **by 2020, chemicals are used and produced in ways that lead to the minimization of significant adverse effects on human health and the environment**", has *not* been met. Chemical pollution [threatens the stability of global ecosystems](#) on which humanity depends and "poses a [global threat to human rights](#), including the right to reproductive health." Current chemical production, use, and disposal is responsible for grave harm to health, widespread environmental damage, huge economic costs, and deep societal injustices. These harms are rapidly worsening. The current trajectory is not sustainable and will increase in severity in the absence of urgent and effective interventions at every level. At the 76th World Health Assembly in May of 2023, delegates passed a resolution on "[The impact of chemicals, waste and pollution on human health](#)," where they noted that "the market and non-market costs of inaction could be as high as 10% of global gross domestic product and that 2 million lives and 53 million disability-adjusted life years were lost in 2019 due to exposures to selected chemicals with nearly half of those deaths attributable to lead exposure and resulting cardiovascular disease and 138,000 deaths from pesticides involved in suicides representing 20% of all global suicides."

¹ This document reflects the view of the HCWH global network, composed by the regional teams in Europe, Latin America, South East Asia, and the United States of America; as well as the regional partners including groundWork in South Africa, HECAF360 in Nepal and PHS in Brazil.

² The Fifth International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM5) to be held in Bonn, Germany on 25-29 September 2023 will be preceded by the resumed fourth session of the Intersessional Process (IP4.3) to negotiate the successor agreement to the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM).

The health sector is a large and influential sector with a significant footprint

The health sector, which represents [10% of the global economy](#), relies extensively on chemicals, such as pharmaceuticals, disinfectants, maintenance chemicals, laboratory chemicals, and chemicals used in products and medical devices. The sector also generates a significant amount of chemical waste, including hazardous waste from medical procedures, pharmaceuticals, and chemicals used for cleaning and sterilization. Without proper management, this waste poses [serious health and environmental risks](#). Given the significant contribution of the sector to global pollution, and resultant health and environmental harm, health care has a central and urgent role to play in eliminating unnecessary products, reducing use, and detoxifying products and processes. Many [solutions are already in place](#) in hospitals around the world (see [Annex 1](#)). A 2023 World Health Assembly [resolution](#) further recognized “the linkages between the health impacts of chemicals, waste, and pollution and other priority global health issues including inequity and vulnerability, maternal and child health, antimicrobial resistance and the meaningful achievement of Universal Health Coverage, and that **inaction on these linkages limits our collective capacity to strengthen our health systems, including in the context of health emergencies.**”

The health sector (health care, public health, poison centers) has a critical role in preventing harm, managing chemicals, and contributing to a toxic-free future

The sector experiences the burden of disease from chemical contamination every day in the care of patients. Because the sector itself, and its many health professionals, are dedicated to the promotion and restoration of health, they are important and key partners in the sound management of chemicals. Health professionals are influential and trusted members of their communities and can educate and advocate for policy change to protect health and the environment. They can also lead by example to demonstrate the sound management of chemicals in health care settings.

The health sector is also representative of the broader economy and uses a very wide array of products and services that are similar to those used in other sectors, including buildings, furnishings, textiles, and cleaning chemicals, among others. Following the adoption in 2013 of the SAICM health sector strategy, which emphasized the need to fully engage the health sector, WHO, together with civil society, developed the [WHO Chemicals Roadmap](#) to guide health sector action and leadership - building knowledge, evidence, and capacity for preventive policy and practices.

Health must be the foundation of all policy

Promoting and protecting health should be a key principle in regulatory and policy decisions. Policy decisions about the use of chemicals, including consideration of the life cycle impacts of chemicals used in health care, should integrate a [health in all policies approach](#), which incorporates a health lens into decision-making across sectors and policy areas.

The following strategic recommendations should guide the successor agreement to SAICM

- **Set the vision and ambition of the agreement to meet the extent of the chemical crisis**
- **Prevention is key.** Apply a hierarchy of interventions to eliminate the worst toxic chemicals to achieve primary prevention. Elimination of [chemicals](#) that are incompatible with health and thriving ecosystems should be prioritized and reflected in targets.
- **Support the reduction of all toxic chemicals, including chemicals in products.**
- **Limit the introduction of novel toxic agents.**
- **Provide a Just Transition** to an environmentally sustainable economy and a toxic-free and zero-waste future, promoting the goals of decent work for all, social inclusion, human rights, and the eradication of poverty.
- **Ensure gender equality:** Promote gender equality for women and girls to empower themselves on chemicals and waste management.
- **Drive transparency throughout supply chains and within agencies.** A principle of ‘no health data, no market’ should govern new chemicals in the economy, and clear, accurate, and timely information should be accessible to the public
- **Support a precautionary approach.** The Precautionary Principle should guide all policymaking. The 1992 Rio Declaration definition states that “where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.”
- **Require the polluter to pay.**
- **Governance in the sound management of chemicals should be responsive and responsibly administered:** The Beyond 2020 framework will benefit from health sector leadership in the Bureau of the International Conference on Chemicals Management. Policymakers should engage advocates and those impacted in their decision-making and commit to managing direct and indirect impacts of actions.
- **Recognize social and environmental justice imperatives** and improve social equity in the sound management of chemicals. Eliminate double standards in the manufacture, sale, distribution, and trade of products.
- **The health care sector can set the standard for best practices,** from policies to implement standards and regulations in the sound management of chemicals.

Annex 1. Resources and case studies

- [Global Green and Healthy Hospitals](#)
- HCWH SAICM Progress Report 2022-2023 on the [Reporting on SAICM implementation website](#)
- [Chemicals of concern to health and environment](#)
- [Chemicals of concern for the health sector](#)
- [Sustainable Procurement Index for Health \(SPIH\)](#)
- [Chemicals Guidance Document](#)
- [Chemicals case studies](#) from the GGHH network
- [Just Transition for healthy people on a healthy planet](#)
- [Reclaiming Health Activism in the Age of Climate Crisis](#) is a campaign guide that draws inspiration from the rich history of health activism in effecting social change.
- [European healthcare's phase-out list for chemicals of concern](#)

Highlighted case studies

[Promoting safer disinfectants in the healthcare sector - SAICM 2.0](#)

Disinfectants are widely used in healthcare settings - they are essential to prevent cross contamination, outbreaks of diseases, and hospital-acquired infections. Yet, the biocidal active substances that are so effective at disinfecting products, surfaces, and skin also pose a variety of potential hazards to human health and the environment. The SAICM 2.0 project, financed by the German Environmental Agency, built upon the pioneering work of the Viennese Database for Disinfectants (WIDES) and broadened its application worldwide.

[Safer chemicals, examples in the Region Västra Götaland, Sweden](#)

Healthcare settings rely on a large variety of maintenance chemicals. Learn more about strategies adopted to reduce the variety and use of these toxic chemicals.

[Other example case studies in the Chemicals Guidance Document](#)

- **Philippines:** Acetic acid: A safer alternative as surface disinfectant (2019)
- **Colombia:** Estrategias para el reemplazo de sustancias químicas nocivas por alternativas más seguras: inventarios, planes de reemplazo y programas de manejo seguro (2017)
- **Colombia:** Chemical substitution case studies (p. 32) (2020)
- **United States:** Rigid endoscopes: Reducing need for hazardous sterilizers (2009)