The health care sector's voice in ending plastic pollution

Submission to the INC-3 of the Global Plastics Treaty

Observer organization: Health Care Without Harm

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The plastic pollution crisis is a health crisis

Scientists warn that we have exceeded planetary boundaries for toxic chemicals, plastics and the climate. The entire life cycle of plastic - including resource extraction, production, use and disposal - contributes to these crises. It also increases inequities, threatens human rights, and is harmful not only for the environment but to human health and well being.

No exemptions for the health care sector

The health sector is a major contributor to the increased demand for plastics, much of which is discarded after a single use. Many medical products are exempt from legislation which limits the use of harmful chemicals in other sectors, such as toys. These factors mean greater exposure of patients, health care workers, communities, and the environment to the toxic life cycle of plastics. In order to protect planetary and human health, we need to reduce consumption, detoxify plastics, and redesign products for safe reuse and to reduce hazards at the end of life.

The false perceptions that plastics -particularly disposable plastic products- are always necessary to provide the highest care and safety in health care settings, and that toxic additives are acceptable in medical devices, must be challenged. The global health system, through the medical supply chain, externalizes the costs and consequences of its plastic consumption and disposal. Evidence-based research and pilots of alternative products can better inform the Plastics Treaty negotiations and its further implementation.

The health care sector's voice

Health care is essential to solving the plastics crisis, as a sector that represents, and can drive, a value-based focus on health and justice. The understanding that health professionals have of the impact of plastics on health and the respect that they command within society makes them a key constituency who can positively influence the plastics debate. They also need to treat patients without having to weigh the benefit of a medical procedure with the potential harm that plastic medical devices pose to the patient, others in the life cycle, and our planet. The participation of health professionals in decision making, exchange of experiences and development of strategies on issues of global concern is therefore fundamental. It cannot be alien to the international discussions that take place, because the transformation and reduction

of the health sector's environmental footprint is also driven from the bottom up. Strengthening the network of educated and engaged procurement officers and health professionals is possible through international cooperation.

The health care sector is already committed to changing the narrative around petrochemicals and plastics in health care by raising awareness of the plastics crisis, its impacts on human and planetary health, the business case for addressing it, and the role of the health sector; creating a polymer hierarchy and rationale for selection of health care plastics; and developing new guidance and messaging around complex chemical, recycling and petrochemical issues. This information must be heard by policy-makers.

Additionally, the healthcare sector has a critical role and unique expertise to contribute to the sound management of chemicals and waste and protecting their community members from their harmful impacts on health and well-being. Capacity building, based on clear, transparent and accurate information is key for this.

Transparency, traceability and responsibility

Plastic hazards include the effects of the chemicals used in their manufacture. Some 10,000 chemicals have been identified in the plastics life cycle, including over 2,400 substances of concern[1]. A combination of a lack of adequate regulation, lack of understanding of the impacts of many of these chemicals, and a lack of transparency on the part of manufacturers about the contents of their products mean that we are all exposed to an uncontrolled mixture of chemicals present in plastics we come into contact with.

Plastics which threaten to cause the most significant damage to the environment and human health must be phased-out as a matter of urgency. Those with persistent, toxic chemicals in their life cycles should be prioritized for elimination. Single use plastics need to be avoided wherever possible. Plastic content should be clearly labeled. Polymers should be amenable to mechanical recycling to a high standard using local infrastructure. Packaging reduction and prioritizing reuse schemes are crucial.

Products must be non-toxic, to prevent the ongoing circulation of hazardous chemicals throughout the society, the economy and the environment. Innovation is essential to ensure that we minimize plastic usage, maximize the proportion of reusable materials, recycle the remaining fraction of single-use plastics; and to keep the plastics we do use circulating out of the environment for as long as possible. Manufacturers of precursors, polymers and products need to provide clear and comprehensive information about the polymers and additives in their products, and shoulder the costs of preventing harm throughout the product cycle by means of extended producer responsibility mechanisms which remain under the control of the Treaty.

Informing, involving and connecting Ministries of Environment and Health

There is a growing health community (health care facilities, universities, suppliers and international organizations) establishing sustainable commitments and implementing climate & health actions -including reducing the use of single use plastics, demanding transparency and awareness of the negative impacts of plastics in health, and expanding markets for safer products. Working sessions and closer communication from all stakeholders involved will accelerate the work to address high volume, high impact and worst class plastics and eliminate the burning and incineration of plastics waste.

Health care's contribution to climate change is concentrated in the supply chain, which is responsible for 70% of the health sector's greenhouse gas emissions. Health service delivery and consumption of natural resources in the production of the health care supplies have significant impacts. The Alliance on Transformative Action on Climate and Health (ATACH) has set a full program of work to green the health care supply chain, among other key topics, where plastics play a key role. The Global Plastics Treaty must be aligned to other international instruments on environment and health.

The growing risk

There is an urgent need to consider essential uses of plastics and dramatically reduce and eliminate them where possible -including in the health care sector. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) projected monthly demand of 89 million medical masks, 76 million gloves, and 1.6 million goggles alone, leading to a 40% increase in disposable personal protective equipment (PPE) production. UN agencies distributed around 87,000 tons of mostly plastic products during the pandemic, but later determined that almost half of it was non-essential.[2]

The complexity of the medical devices manufacturing industry and markets mean that the necessary changes can only come through coordinated international action through the plastics treaty. We hereby call on the international negotiations committee (INC) to encode a non-toxic life cycle in the treaty draft and to set up an intersessional working group to consider how to reconstruct the current medical plastics industry in a form that is consistent with the One Health[3] and the Planetary Health approaches that aim to sustainably balance and optimize the health of people, animals and ecosystems. The Treaty must recognize the interconnectedness of health and environment, and take responsibility for creating a healthier future free from plastic pollution.

Contact: ncruz@hcwh.org

[1] Wiesinger, H. *et al*. (2021) Deep dive into plastic monomers, additives, and processing aids.
[2] WHO (2022) Global analysis of healthcare waste in the context of COVID-19: status, impacts and recommendations
[3] WHO: One Health