Representing Anesthesiology at World Health Assembly 2023

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eflecting Paul Farmer’s famous adage that “surgery is the neglected stepchild of global public health,” anesthesia and surgery advocates usually must work hard to get their voices heard at the World Health Assembly. The recent 76th World Health Assembly was an exception as the agenda included two new resolutions that could be central to the provision of anesthesia and surgery services worldwide.

The World Federation of Societies of Anaesthesiologists (WFSA), in its capacity as a nonstate actor in official relations with the WHO, is invited to attend the World Health Assembly, to have its constituents’ voices heard by the amassed nation-state delegations, and to deliver one-minute individual statements to the assembly. ASA is a member society of WFSA; therefore, YOU were represented at this very important meeting!

Representing WFSA and its member societies were Dr. Wayne Morriss (WFSA President), Dr. Adrian Gelb (WFSA Immediate Past President), Dr. Naima Yusuf Zakaria (Medical Director, Tanga Regional Referral Hospital, Tanzania), Dr. Michael Champeau (ASA President), Kristine Stave (WFSA CEO), and Francis Peel (WFSA Communications and Advocacy Manager).

The two new resolutions of particular interest to our specialty were included in the World Health Assembly’s wider universal health coverage agenda:

• Integrated emergency, critical, and operative care for universal health coverage and protection from health emergencies (also known as the ECO Resolution) (asamonitor.pub/44Bom7v)
• Increasing access to medical oxygen (asamonitor.pub/46JuK8)

WFSA Statement to the 76th World Health Assembly: Item 13.1 – universal health coverage

Anesthesiologists are experts in emergency, critical, and operative care and played a vital role in the care of COVID and non-COVID patients during the pandemic. WFSA welcomes the resolutions on integrated emergency, critical, and operative (ECO) care and improving access to medical oxygen (asamonitor.pub/44VItj).

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed major deficiencies in the integration and delivery of patient care worldwide and inadequate access to medical oxygen in many countries. The pandemic also laid bare chronic underinvestment in anesthesia and surgical services.

WFSA urges member states to:
• Adopt and implement the ECO Resolution and access to medical oxygen resolution
• Address chronic anesthesia and surgical workforce deficiencies through sustainable physician-led training and education
• Harmonize partnerships between policymakers, clinicians, and their professional bodies

The ECO Resolution

Resolution WHA76.2 integrated emergency, critical and operative care for UHC and protection from health emergencies’ seeks to embed emergency, critical, and operative care services as an integral part of a comprehensive primary health care approach.

Integrating ECO services with primary health care aims to bring these services closer to the populations that need them. The sooner people can access care, the better (and less costly) the health outcomes. The integration of these services enables clinical providers to combine efforts, resources, and expertise to achieve a shared goal of improving the health of their patients.

As outlined in a WHO Bulletin article co-authored by WFSA President Wayne Morriss, the distinction between emergency and critical care, between emergency and operative care, or between critical and operative care, is highly variable by context, and ECO services are highly interdependent in all contexts (Bull World Health Organ 2023;101:231-231A).

What is clear is that anesthesiologists are core to the functioning in each of these three services.

ECO represents a people-centered continuum of essential services, and delivery of these services is not associated with any single health worker cadre or specialty. The hopes of the resolution’s authors are that it will help policymakers to see ECO clinicians collectively as a whole rather than as individual competing specialties.

While the resolution may be new, the challenges to implementing and fully realizing it remain stubbornly consistent – an overstretched workforce, chronic underinvestment in anesthesia services, and a lack of policy and planning structures to prioritize and support ECO services.

In response, the WFSA has been similarly consistent in its statements to the World Health Assembly. Engagement with member state delegations (namely governments) must:
• Work with professional bodies to identify solutions to train and retain more anesthesiologists and surgeons
• Prioritize investment in anesthesia services
• Develop and implement National Surgical, Obstetric and Anesthesia Plans as part of their national health planning.

Increasing access to medical oxygen

This resolution outlines the steps necessary for the equitable distribution of affordable medical oxygen. If implemented, the recommendations outlined in this resolution will save thousands of lives.

Reaffirming the critical role of medical oxygen in resilient health systems planning, the resolution calls on countries to undertake actions to scale up access to medical oxygen, including:
• Developing national medical oxygen plans
• Ensuring medical oxygen and associated medical devices are on national lists of essential medicines and medical devices
• Assessing and monitoring oxygen access gaps
• Mobilizing national funding mechanisms.

Under the leadership of our Immediate Past President Adrian Gelb, WFSA has been at the forefront of these global efforts to improve access to medical oxygen. WFSA joined with Every Breath Counts partners to successfully advise the WHO on expanding their definition of medical oxygen to allow for mixed oxygen dilutions and thereby increasing oxygen access

ASA President Michael Champeau, MD, FAAP, FASA, at the 76th World Health Assembly.
Beyond the Palais des Nations
World Health Assembly week is more than just the Assembly, it is a myriad of meetings and side events covering all the major global health issues and more. Reflecting WFSA’s position of leadership within the global surgery community, WSFA leaders were invited to represent the anesthesiologist community at a range of side meetings and events over the week.

WFSA CEO Kristine Stave discussed the ECO and oxygen resolutions at the opening plenary of the G4 Alliance meeting, while Francis Peel spoke about WFSA’s approach to engaging with the WHO.

WFSA co-organized a G4 Alliance event called Resolutions to Reality: Bringing Surgery and Anaesthesia into Primary Health Care (asamonitor.pub/3POElLC).

WFSA representative Dr. Naima Zakaria shared her experiences of anesthesiology in Tanzania and how COVID impacted her ability to care for her patients.

U.S. Agency for International Development Assistant Administrator Atul Gawande spoke about his surgical funding priorities at a WFSA co-sponsored event with the Global Surgery Foundation, United Nations Institute for Training and Research, Harvard Program in Global Surgery and Social Change, and Smile Train on sustainable financing of surgical health systems.

The WFSA World Health Assembly delegation, from left: Francis Peel, Kristine Stave, Dr. Wayne Morriss, Dr. Michael Champeau, Dr. Naima Zakaria, and Dr. Adrian Gelb.

At a special ministerial side event on the implementation of the ECO Resolution, WFSA President Wayne Morriss was invited by the Ethiopian Ministry of Health to speak about how the WFSA would work with WHO member states and WFSA member societies to support the ECO resolution.

WFSA and WHO
One of the most important aspects of participating in the World Health Assembly is the opportunity to meet face to face with WHO teams whose work is relevant to anesthesiology. Meetings and progress were made with:

Patient Safety Flagship team: Agreement on a cobranded set of WHO-WFSA Perioperative Medication Safety Recommendations with a planned release at WCA2024 (asamonitor.pub/3mNcPOS).

Health Workforce team: Development of standardized WHO-approved nomenclature for anesthesia professionals to be incorporated into the International Standard Classification of Occupations.

Medical Devices/Health Products team: Agreement to review and update the WHO-WFSA International Standards for a Safe Practice of Anesthesia (Can J Anaesth 2018;65:698-708). Aspects to be included relate to the recent Oxygen Resolution and the utility of the new International Pharmacopoeia definitions of oxygen. WFSA was part of the team that worked on these definitions.

Other meetings included WHO teams working on essential medicines, environmental sustainability, infection prevention, and, of course, operative and critical care.

Thanks to the WFSA leadership for representing anesthesiology at this important meeting!

Disclosures: Dr. Gelb is a consultant for Haisco Pharma USA Inc. Dr. Drum is a member of the Executive Committee of the Section on Anesthesiology and Pain Medicine of the American Academy of Pediatrics, a board member of ASA’s Charitable Foundation, and a council member of the WFSA.