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## WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—4 MAY 2022

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Good day and thank you for joining today's press briefing.

Last week, our Region reported more than 616,000 new cases, a 12.7% increase over the previous week, and more than 4,200 deaths, a slight drop of less than one percent.

The Caribbean reported a 15.4% increase in new infections, with cases rising in twenty-four of the 34 countries and territories, and deaths in the Caribbean increased for the third consecutive week, by 39.6% as compared to the previous week. Cases continued to rise in Central America, this week by 53.4%, with three out of seven countries reporting increases, even as deaths continued to decline.

In North America, cases increased for the fifth consecutive week, rising 19.5% in comparison to the previous week. The United States reported a 27.1% increase, while Canada and Mexico reported declines in new infections. Both the United States and Canada saw a rise in weekly COVID-19 hospitalizations.

In South America, there was an overall decrease of 8% in new infections, although seven of the ten countries in that region reported increases in cases.

Eleven countries and territories across the Region reported an increase in hospitalizations and increases in admissions to Intensive Care Units.

COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are rising in far too many places, which should prompt us to strengthen our measures to combat the virus, including surveillance and preparedness.

It is crucial to keep our eyes on the virus by monitoring its evolution and maintaining adequate testing capacity.

Good data on what is happening can help each country plan preventive measures, communicate effectively with the public, adjust preventive measures, and reinforce hospital capacity if needed.

Vaccines, however, remain our best resource to save lives, especially when cases rise.

Data from the Public Health Agency of Canada shows that in the month of March, unvaccinated youth and adults were three times more likely to be hospitalized with COVID-19 than fully vaccinated people. The risk is even higher for unvaccinated people over the age of 60.

We must reach those who remain unvaccinated with the full COVID-19 vaccine primary series, and ensure access to boosters, especially to the most vulnerable.

Since COVID vaccines became available, we have delivered 1.8 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines in the Americas. Over Vaccination Week in the Americas last week, we managed to deliver more than 12 million doses.

And this is remarkable progress.

We must maintain this momentum to reach the 230 million people who remain unvaccinated in our Region.

You know - we never would have reached this many people without the essential work of nurses throughout the Americas.

Ahead of International Nurses Day, we want to thank the nurses who have helped achieve this milestone and played a central role in caring for those that fell ill from COVID.

It has not been easy.

Throughout the Americas, nurses bravely faced the brunt of the pandemic, and many struggled from burnout and mental health conditions.

The COVID-19 HEalth caRe wOrkErs Study showed that almost one quarter of health workers who were interviewed in 2020 presented symptoms of a depressive episode, and as many as 15% reported ideas about committing suicide. In some countries only about a third of those who needed psychological care could receive it.

In Brazil, Guatemala, and Colombia, more than 1 in 10 members of the health workforce had symptoms of severe depression.

Today, nurses shoulder the dual burden of caring for COVID patients and catching up those who have missed routine health check-ups over the past two years.

These overlapping stressors caused some to move away from their home areas, leaving hospitals and health centers drastically understaffed. In one global nursing study, 4% of nurses even said they intend to leave the profession because of the pandemic.

Nurses are the backbone of our healthcare workforce, making up 56% of our staff.

We rely on them to provide primary care services, mental health support, and protect the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and families.

When nurses face difficulties doing their jobs, the entire health system suffers.

And that is why we need to double our investments in growing our nursing workforce, and to care for our existing nurses so they can continue to care for us.

To meet our health needs, PAHO estimates that the Region of the Americas will need 1.8 million more nurses by 2030. The United States will need to add 1.2 million nurses to its workforce, and Canada will need 60,000 more by 2025.

To reach this growth, and to retain our existing nurses, countries must have clear policies to develop and retain the health workforce.

Countries can improve governance by creating more senior leadership opportunities for nurses, and elevating nurses and midwives within the government and Ministries of Health.

Jamaica is working on a new National Nursing and Midwifery strategy to better regulate the workforce and plan for the future of the country.

Brazil aims to raise the minimum wage for nurses to ensure that they are adequately compensated for their essential work.

We also need to treat nurses with the respect and dignity that they deserve and to support their mental health.

In a study done in the Caribbean, PAHO found that about 45% of nurses left their jobs for better working conditions.

Countries and territories, individually and in partnership with PAHO, are making efforts to address this issue.

Nursing associations are calling for countries to provide mental health services in health centers to take care of medical workers' mental health.

Chile and Argentina have created hotlines to support the healthcare workers' unique mental health care needs.

And PAHO is rolling out a self-care course catered specifically to health workers.

It is true that the pandemic has challenged the mental wellbeing of all of us – not just the health professionals.

On this topic, I want to mention that PAHO is launching a *High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19* on Friday, May 6.

This Commission will bring together leaders and thought partners to take a closer look at the impact of the pandemic on mental health in the Americas. We have also included persons who suffer from mental health. It will guide PAHO and its Member States to strengthen our efforts to meet mental health needs across our Region.

COVID-19 continues to put a spotlight on the gaps we must address, directing our efforts to build back better and fairer in all aspects of our health systems.

I invite you to also join PAHO for the **International Nurses Day** celebration on Friday, May 6<sup>th</sup>, to call for sustained investment in our current, and future nursing workforce.

We must grasp this chance to strengthen our health systems and health workforce across the Americas, to ensure that we are not only protected from this virus, but can all live happier, healthier lives.