Compassion, the desire and action to alleviate suffering, is a core value of nursing and medicine. It is increasingly recognized as essential for achieving quality health care, even if it is often lacking in modern health care. The benefits of compassion for patient outcomes, physician well-being and hospital systems are well documented, including associations with increased patient adherence to recommended treatment, reduced pain and improved mental health and well-being. In alignment with the WHO strategy on promoting health care quality, many countries have developed national quality policies and strategies, which tend to focus on the core features of quality health systems as defined by WHO: effectiveness, safety and person-centeredness. Our research aims to determine whether similar language on compassion and compassionate care is also present in these NQPS.

**Background**
Compassion, the desire and action to alleviate suffering, is a core value of nursing and medicine. It is increasingly recognized as essential for achieving quality health care, even if it is often lacking in modern health care. The benefits of compassion for patient outcomes, physician well-being and hospital systems are well documented, including associations with increased patient adherence to recommended treatment, reduced pain and improved mental health and well-being. In alignment with the WHO strategy on promoting health care quality, many countries have developed national quality policies and strategies, which tend to focus on the core features of quality health systems as defined by WHO: effectiveness, safety and person-centeredness. Our research aims to determine whether similar language on compassion and compassionate care is also present in these NQPS.

**Objective/Goal**
To inform stakeholders on the degree to which compassion is included and highlighted in national quality policies and strategies and to advocate for its future inclusion.

**Essence**
Many countries publish national quality policies and strategies to set goals and standards, establish values and assess the condition of national health care systems. These national-level health care policy documents help influence the allocation of resources and generate attention for funding, programmes and practices. Many of these documents use WHO definitions of Quality UHC as a foundation for their health care systems. To examine the extent to which NQPS documents incorporate language related to definitions of Quality UHC and compassion, we reviewed 36 national health quality and strategy plans in the database of the WHO Global Learning Laboratory for Quality UHC. In addition to searching for keywords related to the WHO core elements of quality, we reviewed each document for the presence of the terms “compassion” or “compassionate”, “respect” or “respectful”, and “dignity” or “dignified.”

Among the 36, a total of 27 (75%) national quality policies and strategies referred to respect or respectful care and 20 (56%) mentioned dignity or dignified care, but only 7 (19%) mentioned compassion. The documents of seven countries (Ethiopia, Malawi, Malaysia, Scotland, Sierra Leone, Switzerland and Tanzania) mentioned compassion or compassionate care. These countries often cited ‘compassion’ as one of their core values and used ‘compassionate’ as a descriptor for ideal patient care. Just two documents, namely those from Ethiopia and Scotland, had the word compassion consistently interspersed throughout, mentioning it more than 10 times when describing both values and intended practice. Ethiopia advocates for a national compassionate care campaign targeted at the general public, the appointment of so-called compassion ambassadors at multiple levels of health care systems, and requesting funding for research into compassionate practices. Scotland explicitly commits to additional delivery structures, governance, and training programmes dedicated specifically to compassion in health care, as well as a long-term vision of what the general public should expect from compassionate practices. In both countries, concrete actions have been taken to realize compassion in the practice of health care, the training of health care professionals, and the culture of national health services.
As NQPS are revised and updated, including language related to compassionate care can provide the impetus and opportunity for developing more compassionate health systems. As compassionate care becomes further recognized as intrinsic to quality health care, more frequent and detailed articulation of compassion in national quality health plans – along the lines of the current plans for Scotland and Ethiopia – can help to infuse compassion in to all aspects of national health systems and provide the basis for more compassionate, high-quality health care policy and practice.

**Recommendations**

- Share the evidence on compassion and quality health care with officials in ministries of health to increase awareness and encourage the adoption of compassionate care as a central component of health sector planning and funding.
- As national quality policies and strategies are updated, include intentional language on compassion and compassionate care.
- Accelerate research and scholarship on the role of compassion in quality health care with an eye towards including compassion in the WHO definition of quality health care.

**Further information**