

Towards equality in global epilepsy care, and other neurological disorders

J Helen Cross, UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health
President International League Against Epilepsy 2021-2025

Epilepsy is one of the most common neurological diseases, probably the most common in childhood, affecting more than 50 million people of all ages worldwide. Up to 70% of people with epilepsy could live seizure free if they had access to safe low-cost anti-seizure medication. Globally, however, only one in five people with epilepsy receive any form of treatment¹.

In 2019 the World Health Organization in a joint report with the International League Against Epilepsy (ILAE) and the International Bureau for Epilepsy (IBE) declared epilepsy a public health imperative. This reported that 80% of people with epilepsy live in low-and-middle income countries, that epilepsy is associated with widespread stigma and discrimination regardless of geographical location and that over a quarter of all cases are potentially preventable¹.

In 2022, the World Health Assembly (WHA) unanimously approved the Intersectoral Global Action Plan on Epilepsy & Other Neurological Disorders (IGAP)². This followed two decades of joint work and intense advocacy by WHO, ILAE and IBE.³ The 10-year global action plan has five strategic objectives including one specific to epilepsy and aims to significantly reduce the inclusion, treatment and research gaps for epilepsy and other neurological disorders by 2031.

The focus of the IGAP is to achieve universal health coverage for those with neurological disorders, to address stigma and discrimination and to improve the quality of life of people with neurological disorders, their carers and families. The document emphasizes the importance of taking a patient centred, integrated approach to care across the lifespan which has wide implications for all those with neurological disease, including of course children.

A key problem to delivery is a lack of specialist care. Worldwide there is, on average, only 0.39 child neurologists per 100 000 population⁴. The greatest deficits in child neurology specialists and access to training are in low-income countries, the majority in the African and South-East Asia Regions. Currently care for children with neurological diseases in many regions falls to general paediatricians, adult neurologists, and psychiatrists who are also in short supply¹, as well as community or primary health care workers who are often ill equipped to deliver specialized treatment. Critical to improving care will be education and training, provision of which will need to be individualised at a local level.

The approval of the IGAP means that all 194 WHA member states have signed up to the content and are committed to achieving, by 2031, the 10 targets outlined in the document. This gives us a real opportunity to work with ministries of health to improve epilepsy care and to integrate neurological services into universal health coverage worldwide. The WHO with input from the ILAE and IBE has produced a Technical Brief on epilepsy providing key information on epilepsy with recommended actions to policy makers and other stakeholders.⁵ But as with all global commitments we need to work collaboratively to bring about meaningful change. The ILAE and IBE are working together with the International Childhood Neurology Association and the World Federation of Neurology to provide information and tools to enable local communities to move forward in implementing the IGAP and to ensure that all change involves and empowers people with epilepsy, their families, and carers.

With the political momentum that IGAP has created, we should be able to reach this decade's milestone (90-80-70) on the path to realizing ILAE's vision of a world where no person's life is limited by epilepsy: 90% of people with epilepsy worldwide receiving a diagnosis and aware that epilepsy is a treatable brain disorder, 80% of people with epilepsy having access to affordable, appropriate, safe

anti-seizure medication and 70% of those treated attaining good seizure control. An achievable target by 2031.

1. *Epilepsy: a public health imperative* Available from <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/epilepsy-a-public-health-imperative>
2. World Health Organization, Intersectoral Global Action Plan on Epilepsy and Other Neurological Disorders 2022-2031, Available from, <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/intersectoral-global-action-plan-on-epilepsy-and-other-neurological-disorders-2022-2031> , 2022.
3. Guekht A, Brodie M, Secco M, Li S, Volkens N, Wiebe S. The road to a World Health Organisation Global Action Plan on epilepsy and other neurological disorders *Epilepsia* 2021;62:1057-1063
4. Wilmshurst JM, Catsman-Berrevoets C, Gilbert DL, Nagarajan L, Samia P, Serdaroglu E, Triki C, Vidaurre J, Hameed B, for Pediatric Neurology Training study group. Access to Pediatric Neurology training and services worldwide: A survey by the International Child Neurology . *Neurology* published ahead of print DOI: 10.1212/WNL.0000000000207633
5. Improving the lives of people with epilepsy: A technical brief. Available from <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240064072>