

# Suturing the Gaps in Global Health Security: Key Messages from a Panel along the Sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly

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## Abbreviations

LMIC's: low and middle-income countries.  
NGOs, nongovernmental organization.  
GNC: Global Neurosurgery Committee.  
WFNS: World Federation of Neurosurgical  
Societies

Given the increased demand for anesthesia and surgical services during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become clear that surgery is a critical part of health capacity. There is an urgent need to markedly scale up surgical services within health systems strengthening efforts, particularly in LMIC's. We organized a panel titled "Surgery: Suturing the Gaps in Global Health Security" within the larger series "From Pandemic to Progress: Building Capacity Through Global Surgical, Obstetric, Trauma, and Anaesthesia" during the 75th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The event was co-sponsored by the G4 Alliance and the Program in Global Surgery and Social Change (PGSSC) at Harvard Medical School. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, the panel, along with the remainder of the UNGA this year, was virtually, greatly increasing the attendance of physicians, trainees, and policymakers worldwide. Additionally, the panel was recorded and made freely accessible online to allow for viewing by individuals after the session. The panelists highlighted three key themes. Affordable and timely surgical care is critical for global health equity and investing in surgical capacity strengthens pandemic readiness. Key stakeholders such as international and nongovernmental health organizations, philanthropic funders, and particularly national and local governments must be engaged in order to promote cross-sector support. The economic impact of investing in surgical care must be emphasized. Future initiatives will build on these themes in order to improve health care access and security.

## KEYWORDS

global health, global surgery, health system, surgery, united nations.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Although surgical conditions account for nearly 32% of the global burden of disease, approximately 5 billion individuals globally lack access to timely and affordable surgical care 1-3. However, surgical capacity and the associated investment in surgical care are lacking - an additional 143 million surgical procedures are necessary to meet the demand for surgical care, particularly in LMIC's (3-4). Given the increased need for anesthesia and surgical services during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become clear that surgery is a critical part of health capacity (5). Accordingly, there is an urgent need to markedly scale up surgical services within health systems strengthening efforts, particularly in LMIC's.

To promote investment in surgical care in LMIC's, we organized a panel entitled "Surgery: Suturing the Gaps in Global Health Security" within the larger series "From Pandemic to Progress: Building Capacity Through Global Surgical, Obstetric, Trauma, and Anaesthesia" during the 75th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The event was co-sponsored by the G4 Alliance and the Program in Global Surgery and Social Change (PGSSC) at Harvard Medical School. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, the panel, along with the remainder of the UNGA this year, was held virtually, significantly increasing the attendance of physicians, trainees, and policymakers worldwide. Additionally, the panel was recorded and made freely accessible online to allow viewing by individuals after the session. We report our experience in organizing and conducting the meeting, main points from the panelists, and future directions based on themes highlighted in the panel.

We selected speakers with a variety of expertise in global surgery, public health, and health finance. The panelists included:

1. Dr. Jim Yong Kim, former President of the World Bank and current Vice Chairman and Partner of Global Infrastructure Partners
2. Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah, Director General of Health for Malaysia
3. Dr. John Meara, Director of the PGSSC and Co-Lead Commissioner for the Lancet Commission on Global Surgery
4. Dr. Geoff Ibbotson, Founding Member of the Global Surgery Foundation and Senior Health Advisor to the United Nations Institute for Training and Research Programme in Health and Development
5. Dr. Emmanuel Makasa, Chair of SADC Technical Experts Working Group on Surgical Healthcare, Director of Wits-SADC Regional Collaboration Centre for Surgical Healthcare, and Consultant in Orthopaedics and Trauma Surgery
6. Dr. NeemaKaseje, Founding Director of the Surgical Systems Research Group
7. Dr. Emmanuel Ameh, Chair of the Global Initiative for Children's Surgery
8. Ambassador Jimmy Kolker, former United States Ambassador to Burkina Faso and Uganda and Deputy Global AIDS Coordinator for the implementation of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief

The panelists highlighted three critical themes during their discussion.

## **2 | FIRST: AFFORDABLE AND TIMELY SURGICAL CARE IS CRITICAL FOR GLOBAL HEALTH EQUITY AND INVESTING IN SURGICAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENS PANDEMIC READINESS**

Robust surgical systems set the foundation for resilient health systems. The development of a national surgical, obstetric, and anesthesia plan provides a method for capacity building, creating the infrastructure for the care of the critically ill with safety, accessibility, and affordability as the fundamental principles. To achieve this, we must continue to be vocal advocates for strengthened surgical care; involves increasing the conversations regarding the unmet surgical capacity in LMIC's at surgical conferences, public and global health colloquia, and other high-level meetings focused on advancing human health. The panelists spoke to the current situations and these needs, stating:

- "You need a coherent national plan...You need to define what capacity exists to deal with a novel or national threat...This interdependence has never been more important." - Ambassador Jimmy Kolker
- "I think surgical services are critically important; there is so much that is related to surgical care. Just the bare minimum for countries is not ethical, not moral. You have to invest in the full spectrum of care." - Dr. Jim Yong Kim
- "We want a strong, stable, resilient healthcare system that will deal with future challenges like the COVID pandemic. Surgical care serves as the cornerstone of resilient healthcare systems." - Dr. Geoff Ibbotson
- "Children's surgery has been left out of existing surgery programs and existing child health programs...it's a moral and social obligation that our leaders must be invested in surgical care for children." - Dr. Emmanuel Ameh
- "Integration of surgical systems should start now and be relevant to pandemic preparedness and response" - Dr. Emmanuel Makasa

## **3 | SECOND: KEY STAKEHOLDERS SUCH AS INTERNATIONAL AND NONGOVERNMENTAL HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS, PHILANTHROPIC FUNDERS, AND PARTICULARLY NATIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS MUST BE ENGAGED TO PROMOTE CROSS-SECTOR SUPPORT.**

The equitable delivery of surgical care cannot operate in a vacuum but should function as part of a robust health system led by local leaders, promoting coordination of efforts and investment from multiple sources to scale up surgical systems. As a cornerstone of global health security, surgical care inherently requires the collaboration of various stakeholders, and all perspectives must be considered in its scale-up. The panelists stressed the necessity of inclusivity and local leadership in these efforts by emphasizing the importance of cooperative action, particularly considering the COVID-19 pandemic:

- "It is important for us to come together. Unity can make a big difference in healthcare in terms of politics, financing, and global procurement." - Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah

- “This whole process has to be led by people in the field, not by people in high-income countries.” - Dr. Geoff Ibbotsen
- “The most vulnerable [must be] included in everything that we do. We need to engage more broadly and make sure we’re not working in a silo.” - Dr. NeemaKaseje
- “As physicians and surgeons, we need to get outside of our little bubble...We need to go outside our global surgery community.” - Dr. John Meara

#### 4 | THIRD: THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF INVESTING IN SURGICAL CARE MUST BE EMPHASIZED

Investing in surgical services not only saves lives but promotes economic growth. Surgical capacity is an investment in the service of long-term economic growth, while cost savings may be obtained from the integration of health services or innovation (6). Without this investment in surgical capacity, LMIC’s are estimated to have economic productivity losses of US\$ 12.3 trillion between 2015 and 2030 (1). This economic impact can motivate stakeholders to advocate for and enhance surgical capacity. The panelists underscored this financial benefit of investing in surgery:

- “Investing in health and education is correlated more strongly to economic growth than anything...To prevent future expenditures and to promote growth, investing in health and education, in this case, health, is important.” - Dr. Jim Yong Kim
- “Leadership is important to convince the government to invest in surgery.” - Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah
- “A few billion for healthcare can prevent us from spending trillions in the future.” - Dr. Jim Yong Kim
- “In order to get to these goals...we need to actively work with the capital.” - Dr. John Meara

“Surgery: Suturing the Gaps in Global Health Security” provided an illuminating discussion regarding the role of surgical care in health systems. A panel of experts with various backgrounds presented diverse perspectives, while questions from attendees further extended the dialogue. Key themes included the necessity of establishing sustainable surgical systems to promote equity and health security, the importance of inclusiveness through prioritization of local leadership, and the economic benefits of surgery investing. By following these themes, we can help bring surgical care to the 5 billion individuals who currently lack access and promote health security in the process. Future initiatives will build on these themes, and processes have already begun to create a global curriculum in global health system strengthening, thus improving health care access and security.

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