Geneva, 21 July 2011 - World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Margaret Chan has named Professor Sir Liam Donaldson as WHO Envoy for Patient Safety. In this role, Sir Liam, who served as England's Chief Medical Officer between 1998 and 2010, will help the Organization promote patient safety as a global public health priority. Specifically, Sir Liam will mobilize political support for WHO Patient Safety with health leaders around the world and with major donors, philanthropic organizations and governments for priority activities addressing patient safety issues at national and international levels. He will also advise the WHO Director-General on strategic issues in patient safety and propose strategic actions and collaborations at global level.

"With this nomination, WHO is signalling the importance of ensuring that patients get safe, high quality health care all around the world," says Director-General Margaret Chan. "With the support and intellectual leadership of Sir Liam, the Patient Safety Programme has grown from a small specialist initiative within WHO to a global advocacy and scientific community, with activities in over 140 countries and all six WHO regions. It is now poised to do even more."

Every year, hundreds of thousands of patients worldwide are harmed or die while using health services. Data from WHO and other sources indicate that patient safety incidents occur in anything between 4% and 16% of all hospitalized patients. A recent WHO report on the Burden of Health Care-Associated Infections estimates that such infections affect hundreds of millions of people globally. The burden is at least twice as high in developing countries compared to developed countries.

In many cases, this harm is preventable. WHO's Patient Safety Programme (formerly the World Alliance for Patient Safety) was established in 2004 to coordinate, facilitate

and accelerate patient safety improvements around the world. In its first seven years, the programme has stimulated global awareness and knowledge about the importance of patient safety towards building and maintaining effective health systems and services.

The WHO Patient Safety programme created the world's only global "Patients for Patient Safety" movement, and obtained 124 country pledges to reduce health-care associated infection. The programme also launched the world's first ever "Safe Surgery Checklist", used by more than 1 500 hospitals. Its Patient Safety Curriculum Guide enables undergraduates to learn about patient safety before going into clinical practice. Meanwhile 13 000 health-care settings worldwide have taken action to reduce infection rates through improved hand hygiene.

"We have come a long way in raising the world's awareness of patient safety. But challenges still remain" states Sir Liam. "Health care has not achieved the level of safety of many other high risk industries. Citizens of countries around the world find it incredible that errors lead to patients getting the wrong operation or the wrong medication, sometimes with fatal consequences. Lessons need to be learned from such tragedies and action taken. The WHO Patient Safety Programme will be the cornerstone of a renewed effort globally to address these issues."

Sir Liam served as Chairman of the World Alliance for Patient Safety. He currently holds a number of appointments, including Chancellor of Newcastle University, Chairman of the National Patient Safety Agency in England, and Chair in Health Policy at Imperial College, London.

Related links:

http://www.who.int/patientsafety/en/

Report on the Burden of Health Care-Associated Infections: http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241501507_eng.pdf