GENEVA ¦ 4 May 2012 -- On **Hand Hygiene Day** (5 May), more than 15 000 health-care facilities from 156 countries are participating in the World Health Organization's (WHO) SAVE LIVES: Clean Your Hands Initiative by committing to improve patient safety by practicing better hand hygiene.

This commitment means almost 10 million health-care workers aiming to implement hand hygiene best practices, such as cleansing hands in specific moments during patient care. These steps help to combat the often hidden but persistent public health hazard of health care-associated infections.

Many of the germs causing these infections are transferred by hands when health-care providers or visitors are touching the patient while providing assistance. Using proper hand hygiene to keep hands clean is critical to reducing the risk of health care-associated infections in patients. The most common infections are urinary tract and surgical site infections, pneumonia and infections of the bloodstream.

"Health care-associated infection is a major burden around the world and threatens the safety and care for patients," said Sir Liam Donaldson, WHO Patient Safety Envoy. "I urge the health-care community to take firm and decisive action to save lives from this preventable harm."

Of every 100 hospitalized patients, at least 7 in developed and 10 in developing countries will acquire health care-associated infections. In intensive care units, that figure rises to around 30%, according to a recent WHO report.[1]

A new WHO survey of more than 2000 healthcare facilities in 69 countries, found that 65% of them are at a good level of progress with regards to hand hygiene promotion, resources and activities, but at least 35% are still at an inadequate or basic level. Promising achievements in promoting hand hygiene through reminders and education of health-care workers have occurred in more than 90% of health-care facilities, but improvement is still needed in areas such as monitoring of hand hygiene practices and establishing optimal hand hygiene behaviour within a strong patient safety culture.

When working with patients, hand hygiene should be performed in specific moments either by handwashing with soap and water or by handrubbing with an alcohol-based formulation. WHO recommends alcohol-based handrub as the most effective and easiest method for hand hygiene performance during routine health-care delivery.

"But handrubs are not available or not affordable in many countries," says Dr Benedetta Allegranzi, team lead in the WHO Patient Safety Clean Care is Safer Care program. "Improving affordability and accessibility to this simple and proven intervention will save lives, and it will require working with both public and private partners."

To address these issues, the WHO Patient Safety Programme is launching the Private Organizations for Patient Safety (POPS)[2], a computer-based platform for knowledge sharing to promote compliance with WHO recommendations, share information and enhance hand hygiene product availability and accessibility in all parts of the world.