



**Video message from
Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
to the General Assembly of the World Medical Association
in Berlin
on 7 October 2022**

Humans have been striving to rid the world of pain, depression, disease and death since time immemorial. “Primum non nocere, secundum cavere, tertium sanare” – do no harm, be careful, heal! This guiding principle of the Hippocratic tradition applies unchanged to doctors around the world to this very day, even after 2,000 years. The driving force behind medical research and the medical profession is therefore a kind of primal instinct for which no effort is too great and no means too expensive. And yet, abominable crimes committed in many wars have shown that the medical profession needs an international and intercultural set of values which lays down respect for human life as an unalterable tenet.

In order to define this tenet for the medical profession, issues of medical ethics were the focus of attention when the World Medical Association (WMA) was founded in Paris in 1947, and the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed by the UN and the Declaration of Geneva by the World Medical Association in the same year. These documents, the mark of a civilised world, were preceded before and during the Second World War by barbaric crimes, committed in particular by doctors from Germany. I am grateful and relieved that today we have left this dark chapter in our country’s history far behind us and that we can now look back together on 75 years of continuous work on medical ethics by the World Medical Association and the German Medical Association in Germany. In your organisation’s early years, it certainly could not have been taken for granted that today I would have the privilege of welcoming you to the General Assembly of the World Medical Association in the German capital or that German physicians would have been active members of your

organisation for decades. It is a great honour to have you with us here in Germany for the fourth time: welcome to Berlin!

I would like to thank you, Dr Reinhardt, and you, Dr Montgomery, as the President and Honorary President of the German Medical Association, for all your work in preparing this conference. I am certain that the German Medical Association will represent our country well and will offer you, physicians from almost all regions of the world, an attractive and stimulating programme for your week in this city. By the way, we are very proud of this city's renowned hospital, which bears the name Charité – or charity. We are delighted that a WHO Hub for Pandemic and Epidemic Intelligence is to be established here.

In the 75 years of its existence, the World Medical Association has embraced the civilisational progress of the medical profession and drawn up guidelines which have been largely incorporated as international standards into the codes of professional conduct for physicians in individual countries. The guiding principles were always to place the Hippocratic imperative to heal to the fore, to protect the sensitive confidential relationship between doctor and patient and to curb the drive to make new medical discoveries where, for example, the human rights of those taking part in trials are not guaranteed.

You all know this constitutive basis for medical practice as the Declaration of Geneva or the Declaration of Helsinki. During your General Assembly, you intend to add a declaration against racism in medicine to these foundation documents on medical ethics. Your aim is to ensure that even greater emphasis is placed on equality, both that of patients and of doctors. If your conference succeeds in adopting this declaration, it would mark an important step on the road towards a global understanding of the fundamental values of peaceful co-existence among nations. I encourage you to take it. Of course, I wish you a productive debate and every success with your other projects, such as the International Medical Code of Ethics. This code is intended to address the needs of our age in relation to the medical profession and to focus attention on equality and justice in the health sector.

At the same time, however, we see that much of what has been achieved in the sphere of medical ethics thanks to the work of the WMA, and which we regarded as the norm until recently, are by no means that. With Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, we are witnessing a relapse into pre-modern times, also in terms of medical ethics. Doctors have to risk their own lives in the war zones to help the injured. As an international community, we have to press for humanitarian workers to finally be granted access to combat zones.

However, many other deep-seated challenges, such as global pandemics or the impact of accelerating climate change, have seriously tested the medical profession. In the COVID-19 pandemic, many physicians were pushed beyond their limits to save lives and have given

everything in therapies and research to fight this coronavirus which has jumped to humans for the first time. It remains a once-in-a-hundred-years occurrence, indeed a medical miracle, that the world was able to produce vaccines for an acute pandemic at unprecedented speed in a cooperative division of labour among international research networks. More than any other profession, doctors are the ones who allayed the concerns of their patients by providing up-to-date information in confidential conversations and developed therapies. I would like to thank you all most sincerely for that.

The objective of the COVAX initiative remains relevant in light of the uneven distribution of vaccines. I therefore urge the international community to provide substantial help in the form of vaccine supplies and health information, especially to nations with weaker economies. Only if we overcome the pandemic in a spirit of cooperation we will be able to maintain trust, the most valuable resource in the co-existence among states.

The current pandemic has speeded up our learning curve when it comes to improving global health and has released huge resources. But on its own, it is not enough. We will remain reliant on a spirit of cooperation and mutual trust among states in order to strengthen the international community's resilience in future pandemics and health crises. It therefore continues to be absolutely vital that we are better prepared when it comes to global health. For the advance of climate change is also altering human habitats and putting pressure on healthcare systems in many different ways. Your profession in particular is confronted with the concrete impact of climate change on people's daily lives. For that reason, strengthening global health and therapies for environmental diseases are among the measures needed to adapt to climate change.

The 75th anniversary of the World Medical Association and the 75th anniversary of the German Medical Association is an auspicious occasion to thank you, as representatives of all physicians, for your daily service – in practices, in hospitals, as well as in research and teaching. You accompany human life from the beginning to the end. People place their trust in you, in good and even more so in difficult times. You want to – and will – continue to learn and heal together, as well as to devote yourselves to science and humanity. On that note, thank you very much. I wish you a stimulating General Assembly and an interesting stay here in Berlin!