The World Health Assembly is the global body of all your Ministers of Health or their most senior officials entrusted to safeguard the health of the population of every country in the world. When considering the first landmark World Health Organisation report on the effects of nuclear war on health and health services in 1983, they concluded that “nuclear weapons constitute the greatest immediate threat to the health and welfare of [hu]mankind”. That was 33 years ago.

Responsible public policy needs to be firmly rooted in evidence. Yet this greatest immediate threat to humankind has long been denied, ignored and irresponsibly neglected.

It is extraordinary that that the first time governments met for the specific purpose of considering the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons, in Oslo in 2013, was 68 years after nuclear weapons were detonated over the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It is inconsistent that the well-founded global concern about accelerating global warming is not paralleled by concern about the greatest risk of acute climate disruption – which is nuclear war.

Especially with 795 million people in the world already chronically hungry now, it is remarkable that no government or group of governments has yet commissioned and made public a report from its national research organisations, examining the effects on the food and water security and nutrition of its people from the climatic impacts of a nuclear war, even in a distant global region. The findings of such studies would provide a compelling opportunity for education of the public and decision-makers, to galvanise preventive action.

All the governments represented here can help cure the historical pathological denial by basing their policy and action on the evidence of what nuclear weapons actually do.

There is a relentless trend. The more we learn, the worse it looks. On the long-term effects of ionising radiation; on the vulnerability of the global climate and food supply to long-term disruption from the smoke from burning cities; on the fragility of achievements in global health, development and wellbeing as we increasingly come up against the Earth’s environmental limits.

Any use of nuclear weapons would invite retaliation and risk uncontrollable escalation. To risk nuclear war cannot protect anyone’s security. The evidence now clearly shows that nuclear war would be suicidal for any perpetrator state.

These are clearly most inconvenient truths for those who possess, rely on and thereby threaten to use the most indiscriminate and inhumane of all weapons. But
given what we now know, to believe that nuclear weapons can serve security interests, that there can be a legitimate use for the most indiscriminate and inhumane of all weapons, that they can be retained without being used, that biological and chemical weapons should be banned but nuclear weapons – these are dangerous delusions that risk planetary health.

As Dr Helfand said, real understanding of what nuclear weapons actually do invalidates all arguments for their continued possession and requires that they urgently be prohibited and eliminated as the only course of action commensurate with the existential danger they pose.

You have before you in a WP submitted to this meeting, the world's leading global federations representing doctors, nurses and public health professionals worldwide, coming together the first time with IPPNW, which was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for its “considerable service to [hu]mankind by spreading authoritative information and by creating an awareness of the catastrophic consequences of atomic warfare”.

The evidence demands urgent action to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons. This is a global health imperative.

This assessment is based on the shared professional, ethical obligation of health professionals to care for and cure the sick, to prevent disease and suffering, and to base our practice in evidence. You trust us with the health of your citizens, your families, yourselves. When your GP, specialist, nurse and health department, with their colleagues around the world, speak with one voice regarding a grave threat to health, it would be wise to listen and heed their advice.

The historical evidence shows that for each kind of indiscriminate and inhumane weapon subject to a regime for their elimination – for biological and chemical weapons, antipersonnel landmines and cluster munitions – establishment of an unequivocal norm of prohibition of weapons with unacceptable effects has preceded, enabled and been the basis for subsequent work towards their elimination. That is the proven, logical path. It is also the only feasible, practical option at this time. The states represented in this room cannot eliminate weapons they don’t own. But they can prohibit them, internationally and in domestic legislation. Banning and eliminating nuclear weapons is the only way to secure planetary health.