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Twenty years of world kidney day; a review of its mission and milestones

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ABSTRACT

World Kidney Day (WKD), established in 2006, marks a pivotal milestone in 2026 as it celebrates its 20th anniversary. This event was first observed on March 9, 2006, as a joint initiative of the International Society of Nephrology (ISN) and the International Federation of Kidney Foundations (IFKF), now known as the International Kidney Foundation – World kidney alliance (IKF-WKA). The primary objective was to raise global awareness about the increasing burden of kidney diseases and to promote preventive behaviors and equitable access to care. Since its inception, WKD has grown into a powerful global movement, celebrated annually on the second Thursday of March by several countries across six continents. As WKD approaches its 20th anniversary in 2026, it offers a timely opportunity to reflect on two decades of achievements, challenges, and lessons learned. Over the past two decades, WKD has evolved from a modest awareness initiative into a globally recognized health campaign, uniting healthcare professionals, policymakers, and patient advocacy groups in the efforts against kidney disease. Finally, this event highlights the importance of addressing chronic kidney disease through awareness, prevention, screening, and comprehensive management to improve outcomes and reduce the global health burden of kidney disease.

Implication for health policy/practice/research/medical education:

World kidney day (WKD) is an international health awareness initiative dedicated to improving knowledge about kidney disease and promoting kidney health. Celebrated every year on the second Thursday of March, WKD aims to lower the prevalence and consequences of kidney-related conditions worldwide. This campaign is a collaborative effort between the International Society of Nephrology (ISN) and the International Federation of Kidney Foundations (IFKF). The main goal of WKD is to highlight the essential role of the kidneys in maintaining overall health and to lessen the global impact of kidney diseases. The initiative emphasizes key areas such as prevention, early diagnosis, and proper treatment of kidney disorders. This mission also addresses the fact that kidney disease is common, harmful, and treatable, yet often goes undetected due to a general lack of public awareness.

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Introduction

World Kidney Day (WKD) is an international health awareness event held every year on the second Thursday of March, beginning with its inception in 2006 (1). Its

core mission is to raise awareness about the importance of kidney health, promote early detection and prevention of kidney diseases, and advocate for reasonable access to kidney care worldwide (2). The campaign is a joint

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initiative of the International Society of Nephrology (ISN) and the International Federation of Kidney Foundations – World Kidney Alliance (IFKF-WKA) (1, 3). Over the years, WKD has grown significantly in scope and impact, with each year featuring a specific theme addressing various aspects of kidney health, disease prevention, and management (4). As WKD approaches its 20th anniversary in 2026, it offers a timely opportunity to reflect on two decades of achievements, challenges, and lessons learned. Meanwhile, the WKD aims to educate the public and healthcare professionals about the vital role kidneys play in overall health, including renal function, blood pressure regulation, and maintaining electrolyte balance (5,6). The campaign focuses on reducing the global burden of chronic kidney disease (CKD) by promoting early detection, preventive behaviors, and management strategies to slow disease progression and improve patient outcomes (7). By increasing public knowledge and encouraging lifestyle changes such as managing diabetes, hypertension, limiting salt and sugar intake, staying hydrated, and exercising regularly, this event seeks to prevent up to 50% of kidney disease cases (8). The campaign also emphasizes the importance of kidney health impartiality, advocating for improved healthcare policies and access to essential kidney care worldwide (4). This overview considers the origins, mission, and evolution of WKD, analyzing its impact on public awareness, policy development, clinical practices, and global kidney health outcomes. Furthermore, we highlight key achievements in research, prevention, and treatment access, while addressing persistent challenges such as disparities in care, under diagnosis, and the rising burden of CKD in low- and middle-income countries. As we reflect on two decades of advocacy and action, this paper emphasizes on the importance of sustained commitment to kidney health and proposes strategic directions for future global kidney disease prevention and management.

Search strategy

For this review, we conducted a comprehensive search across databases including PubMed, Web of Science, EBSCO, Scopus, Google Scholar, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and Embase, using a variety of relevant keywords like world kidney day, kidney health awareness, chronic kidney disease, kidney disease prevention, kidney disease education, nephrology outreach and global kidney care.

Global impact and continued goals of WKD

Over nearly two decades, WKD has significantly raised the profile of kidney disease as a public health priority (9). The WKD focuses on the staggering global prevalence of CKD, which affects millions of people worldwide, many unknowingly due to the silent nature of the disease's progression (9,10). The campaign encourages governments and healthcare organizations to improve

policy action, funding, and access to transplantation and dialysis services (10). This event also promotes organ donation awareness as a crucial part of managing end-stage renal disease (11,12). It supports training and education for healthcare professionals through several programs and fosters community engagement to improve kidney health literacy (13). In fact, by uniting healthcare professionals, policymakers, patients, and the public, WKD continues to drive meaningful change towards reducing the burden of kidney disease through prevention, early detection, improved care, and equitable access to treatment worldwide (14).

Increasing awareness and education

One of the core objectives of WKD is to combat the widespread ignorance about kidney health (2). Surveys conducted before the advent of WKD revealed that less than 5% of the general population could accurately identify the location and function of their kidneys (15). To overcome this, WKD promotes educational initiatives and disseminates information through various channels, emphasizing the invisible nature of CKD until it reaches advanced stages (16). The campaign has historically used slogans like “Are your kidneys OK?” to stimulate public curiosity and encourage proactive health checks (17).

Promoting early detection and prevention

A crucial aim of WKD is to highlight the importance of early detection and prevention of kidney disease (2,7). Early detection allows for interventions that can slow or halt the progression of CKD and significantly reduce associated cardiovascular complications and premature death (18). WKD advocates for targeted screening programs, particularly for individuals at high risk, such as those with diabetes, hypertension, coronary heart disease, and cerebrovascular disease (19). Simple and inexpensive tests, like urine for protein and blood for serum creatinine to assess the glomerular filtration rate, are key to early diagnosis (20,21).

Advocating for policy changes and equitable access to care

WKD also serves as a platform to influence health policy and practice globally (4). The campaign underscores the need for governments and other institutions to prioritize kidney health on their agendas (22). This includes advocating for funding, improved healthcare delivery systems, and equitable access to care for all, especially in disadvantaged populations (14). The 2024 WKD theme, “kidney health for all – promoting fair access to care and best medication practices,” focuses specifically on tackling these inequalities (23). The 2025 theme, “are your kidneys ok? Detect early, protect kidney health,” highlights the significant difference that early diagnosis and timely treatment can make in preserving kidney health (24).

Promoting research and clinical practice

The WKD also encourages research programs to address unanswered questions about CKD, such as factors predicting progression to end-stage renal disease and the efficacy of new healthcare strategies (25). It serves as an annual reminder for bringing attention to disease awareness and motivates the publication of expert reviews on various aspects of kidney disease, such as obesity and kidney disease, or emerging trends in renoprotective agents (26). The emphasis on early detection and prevention is the best modality in public health, saving lives and reducing costs (27). WKD has also influenced clinical guidelines (28). Many national health systems now recommend routine kidney function testing for high-risk individuals, a practice that was rare two decades ago (24). For example, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the UK National Health Service (NHS) have incorporated kidney screening into annual wellness visits for patients with diabetes or hypertension (29).

Challenges and future directions

The WKD has successfully evolved from a hypothesis into a powerful annual global campaign (25). As it celebrates its 20th anniversary, its mission to raise awareness, promote early detection, and advocate for equitable care remains more vital than ever, especially given the growing global burden of kidney disease and the challenges posed by health disparities and global crises (9,30). Despite the successes, significant challenges remain in combating kidney disease (31). CKD affects approximately 850 million people worldwide, causing at least 2.4 million deaths per year, and is the sixth fastest-growing cause of death (32,33). Health disparities and inequities in kidney health are still widespread (34).

Focus on chronic kidney disease

In the event of WKD, CKD is a primary focus area given its global public health impact (35). CKD affects about 10% of the global population and is often asymptomatic in early stages, leading to late diagnosis when significant kidney damage has already occurred (4). Key points regarding CKD in relation to WKD include; i) CKD is a major global health challenge linked strongly to cardiovascular disease, which is the leading cause of death among CKD patients (36). ii) Early detection by large-scale screening is crucial, especially for high-risk groups such as those with diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and metabolic syndrome (37,38). iii) Lifestyle factors like healthy diet, hydration, and managing obesity play a critical role in CKD prevention (39). iv) Multilayered management and advances in personalized therapies have improved CKD outcomes, including slowing disease progression and reducing cardiovascular mortality (40). v) In advanced stages, preparation for renal replacement therapy or transplantation is vital (41). Meanwhile, WKD

serves as a call to action for global efforts focused on CKD prevention, screening, early intervention, and patient-centered care to reduce the disease burden worldwide (14).

Conclusion

Since WKD was established in 2006, it has grown into the most effective campaign for educating both policymakers and the public about the significance of kidney disease. Over its twenty-year history (2006-2026), WKD has achieved significant success in bringing global attention to kidney disease. It has fostered collaborations among the global renal community, including physicians, scientists, nurses, patients, and policymakers. Additionally, WKD provides a crucial opportunity to educate health policy makers and individuals at the highest risk for CKD. The campaign's consistent messaging regarding risk factors like diabetes, hypertension, dyslipidemia, metabolic syndrome, and obesity encourages lifestyle modifications and timely medical intervention. By advocating for renal health, this event has sparked conversations in multiple countries about overhauling funding and healthcare delivery systems to prioritize early diagnosis and prevention.

Authors' contribution

Conceptualization: Sina Salem Ahim, Shiva Hosseinian, and Salehoddin Bouya.

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Supervision: All authors.

Validation: Rasoul Jafari Arismani and Sina Salem Ahim.

Visualization: Shiva Hosseinian and Saba Homapour.

Writing-original draft: All authors.

Writing-review and editing: All authors.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors utilized Perplexity to refine grammar points and language style in writing. Subsequently, the authors thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as necessary, assuming full responsibility for the publication's content.

Ethical issues

Ethical issues (including plagiarism, data fabrication, and double publication) have been completely observed by the authors.

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