

Overview of the state of the Ukrainian healthcare system since the start of the war

Igor Guschuk¹  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8075-9388>

Nataliia Oleksiuk²  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4620-328X>

¹ National University Ostroh Academy

² Wrocław Medical University

Address for correspondence: Igor Guschuk (Ihor Hushchuk), Ostroh, Ukraine, igorgus2014@gmail.com, asoc_ses@ukr.net

Abstract

This publication is an analogue of the report on the review of the state of the health care system of Ukraine since the beginning of the war. This report was presented as a part of an international event—a special meeting on the topic “War in Ukraine and public health,” organized on May 22, 2022 by ASPHER (Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region). The speech not only indicated the terrible consequences and the humanitarian crisis due to military aggression by Russia, but also partially considered multiple issues: 1) state of sanitary and epidemic well-being of Ukrainian citizens and threats to the health of the population during the war; 2) needs which can be met by organizations such as ASPHER to strengthen human resources for Ukraine in the field of public health; 3) steps which must be taken in the shortest possible time to strengthen the restoration of the Ukrainian healthcare system and ensure the proper state of sanitary and epidemic well-being of the population.

Key words: ASPHER, crisis, help, public health, war, Ukraine

Słowa kluczowe: ASPHER, kryzys, pomoc, Ukraina, wojna, zdrowie publiczne

I.

At this difficult time for Ukraine and the free world after Russia’s military attack, we want to inform participants about what is happening now in Ukraine from the perspective of public health threats.

As you know, at dawn on the twenty-fourth of February this year, Russia attacked Ukraine along the entire length of the common border, from Luhansk to Chernihiv, as well as from the territory of Belarus and occupied Crimea.

The war in Ukraine has led to a severe humanitarian crisis among the civilian population living in the cities, especially those affected by shelling performed by the Russian aggressor.

The lack of “green corridors” in the first weeks of the war led not only to physical but also to moral suffering among the people who were trying to escape the war-impacted regions.

Civilians in besieged cities often have to hide during shelling in basements that lack proper heating, water,

lighting, sewage and other basic needs. A clear example of this are the inhabitants of the city of Mariupol, counting nearly half a million population before the war started.

After two months of war in Ukraine, the consequences are major: according to preliminary data, there are about 4,000 wounded civilians, more than 3,500 dead, including 235 children. 13 million citizens have been displaced, and about 16 million Ukrainians overall are in need of help [1].

It should be noted that 8 million people are internally displaced (people who have moved to other regions of Ukraine), of which approximately 2.5 million suffer from chronic diseases. They will most certainly seek health services in those regions and this will definitely affect the healthcare system.

According to The Ministry of Healthcare of Ukraine, as of the 10th of May, the occupiers had damaged 600 medical facilities and more than 450 pharmacies. 101 hospitals were completely destroyed, and nearly 200 ambulances were shot at or seized [2].

In total, since the beginning of the military aggression, there have been 211 attacks on health facilities, as the result of which 55 people were wounded and 75 were killed [1].

Due to the hospital destruction, hundreds of thousands of people have lost uninterrupted access to necessary medical care. About 1,000 medical facilities are located in close proximity of the conflict border or are in zones controlled by Russia and Russia-backed separatists. As the consequence of that, there is limited or no access to pharmaceuticals, medical facilities and medical workers. In addition, the Russian military continues to block humanitarian convoys that could have delivered medicine to the temporarily occupied territories.

Mass displacements of the population inside the country and Russian attacks caused the disruption of the provision and continuity of medical care in Ukraine to which the health care system had to adapt quickly.

First of all, because of active combat operations, the focus of medical care shifts to injuries, wounds, burns, fractures, etc.; some hospitals have been converted to care for the wounded soldiers and civilians. This shift means a lower priority of care for patients with non-communicable diseases, tuberculosis, HIV, diabetes, etc; COVID-19 vaccinations and routine immunizations have also been stopped; so everything must be done to ensure assistance is provided and its continuity is maintained.

The Ministry of Health of Ukraine is attempting to provide proper medical care to the population during the war, trying to quickly fulfill the needs of regional health care facilities and solve the issue of redistribution of pharmaceuticals between regions.

Under martial law, The Public Health Centre of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine continues to monitor the situation outside of the active combat zones and react to emergencies in a timely manner [3].

These emergencies include, but are not limited to:

- radiation monitoring and dosimetric control;
- chemical monitoring and control;
- monitoring the quality and safety of drinking water by microbiological and other indicators.

The Public Health Emergency Response Centre has been switched to round-the-clock operation. Information on significant technogenic emergencies provided by the regional Centers of Disease Control and Prevention is being collected.

The monitoring of the pandemic situation takes place as well, the same applies to the work of health care institutions; the logistics of medicines in the conditions of war are being established; doctors of primary, secondary and tertiary medicine are performing their duties; negotiations are underway with neighboring countries to provide necessary medicines to patients fleeing abroad.

It should be mentioned that the world's international institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Red Cross in the first days and weeks of the war showed their inability to respond quickly and effectively to this, without exaggeration, global military threat.

Now, the situation has changed dramatically, and we want to thank our European colleagues for their

unprecedented support of Ukraine and our people, especially from Poland, the Baltic countries, Great Britain and others.

The war in Ukraine and its health impact on a local level as well as health issues in the region and beyond was a focus of a special session of WHO/Europe dated May 10–11, 2022, which adopted a resolution entitled “Health Emergencies in Ukraine and Neighboring Countries Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation” [4]. At the same time, WHO and WHO/Europe outlined the commitment to support the people of Ukraine both at this time and in the long term.

II.

In the context of public health, it is necessary for professionals to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What is the state of sanitary and epidemic well-being of Ukrainian citizens and what are the threats to public health during the war?
2. What steps should be taken to strengthen the restoration of the Ukrainian healthcare system and ensure the proper state of sanitary and epidemic well-being of the population?
3. Which particular needs could be met by organizations like ASPHER in order to strengthen human resources for Ukraine in the field of public health?

Let's focus on these questions briefly.

The first question

The sanitary and epidemic situation in Ukraine is tense but under control. The Ministry of Health, the Centers of Public Health and local authorities are making every effort to prevent epidemic complications among the population.

The sanitary and epidemic situation in cities that are being shelled constantly is a cause for concern. The disabling of water supply and sewerage facilities, electricity supply, cleaning of settlements and waste management, among other things, is a serious challenge for the Ukrainian authorities.

The large number of internally displaced citizens and the onset of the summer period could cause a certain deterioration in the sanitary and epidemic situation in the many regions of Ukraine, including a possible increase in vaccine-preventable infectious diseases, due to deterioration of the organization and implementation of routine vaccinations.

Deterioration in the safety of the human life (environmental safety) is also expected.

The real environmental threats that emerged during the Russian attack could have catastrophic consequences for public health, both regionally and globally. This impact could be generated by:

- nuclear power plants;
- large chemical plants and production facilities of the food sector, where chemical compounds are used;

- the destruction of wastewater treatment facilities in populated areas and large industrial facilities;
- the destruction of dams and locks.

The second question

Measures to reform the national healthcare system, which began in May 2014, were not completed, so Ukraine did not have an approved Concepts, Strategy and Implementation program for reforming the national healthcare system until the outbreak of war. The Ukrainian Medical Expert Association has repeatedly pointed this out to the highest state officials and the leadership of the Ministry of Health.

So far, certain structural elements of medical reform, for the most part relating to changes in the financing of the healthcare industry, are presented as a complete set of reforms achieved, which is not true for a simple fact that the cost-related changes were not the objective of these reforms in the first place.

In this context, we should return to the already developed drafts of the Concept and Strategy for Reforming the National Healthcare System in order to arrive at a consolidated decision between the professional community, the government, and the public [5].

In the field of public health, to ensure the sanitary and epidemic well-being of the population, the main national institution was the State Sanitary Epidemiological Service, which had a unique practical experience in dealing with emergencies in both the sphere of biological safety and human environment safety. Unfortunately, its reorganization in 2010, and then its complete liquidation in March 2017, destroyed a clear vertical of response and counteraction to emerging threats.

Today, the development of the public health system should take place as soon as possible, through the

development of a new national institution in the form of the Public Health Service, taking into account its best domestic and international experience, which was reflected in the scientific report of the National Institute for Strategic Studies in July 2020 “Ukraine After the Corona Crisis: Ways to Recover” [6]. The recommendations presented are still relevant today.

The third question

In our opinion, cooperation with well-known international institutes such as ASPHER, should be aimed at resolving the problem with staff shortages. ASPHER could provide training for public health professionals (bachelors and masters). Faster training for those who have a basic medical education can be designed.

We propose to create a working group of Ukrainian scientific-pedagogical workers under the leadership of ASPHER. Revision of the educational programs and relevant standards in the field of public health is supposed to be purpose of this group. It is a top priority at this time due to the need of filling the methodological lacks that currently exist in the personnel training policy.

III.

We would like to thank Ukrainian doctors, the leadership of the Ministry of Health and the international medical community for the unmeasurable work that is being done to save the life and health of the Ukrainian people during this difficult time for everyone.

Gdansk–Ostroh, May 20, 2022.

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