Editorial: The Public Health Implications for the Refugee Population, Particularly in Poland, Due to the War in Ukraine

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Abstract
On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation initiated a military invasion of Ukraine, resulting in a significant armed conflict in Europe. Large numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers have left Ukraine. As of March 29, more than 4 million refugees, including over 1.5 million children, have left Ukraine, while about 7 million individuals have become displaced within Ukraine. Most refugees have gone to bordering countries, with 60% coming to Poland. This large number of refugees in such a short time requires urgent public health measures to ensure their health and safety. Refugees to Poland must receive access to healthcare, social care, and education. Those who have chronic disease and malignancy must continue to receive treatment. Medical students’ continued education and training in their host countries should be prioritized to provide needed healthcare resources. Epidemiological disease surveillance and disease prevention are required at this time. The continuation of the current conflict in Ukraine also poses a potentially severe risk to the global environment and long-term food security. This editorial aims to highlight the public health implications for the refugee population, particularly in Poland, due to the current war in Ukraine.

Keywords: Editorial • Public Health • Refugees • Armed Conflicts • Poland • Ukraine
Europe calls for European countries to ensure the protection of refugees. Support the medical care of refugees within the host countries. The medical professionals amongst the Ukrainian refugees could be recognized as one of the main factors that limit healthcare utilization. Healthcare specialists should also be provided with professional training and equipment. Refugees lack medical documentation, while those who possess it may have documentation only in the Ukrainian language. Host countries need support, so an international effort is required to remove financial barriers, which prevent helping those in need.

Healthcare systems across the European Union (EU) are adjusting to deal with the massive influx of arrivals from Ukraine. It is essential to provide treatment for oncological patients, patients with renal failure, those who have undergone transplantation, and those who require immunosuppressive treatment [9]. The EU has been mediating the relocation of Ukrainian oncology patients to its member states [9]. However, mental and psychosocial support services should also be provided within the host country due to the high burden of psychological distress and trauma experienced by many refugees [9]. These services may be provided online and using video consultations.

Approximately 2.7 million persons with disabilities are registered in Ukraine [10]. Individuals with disabilities face a greater risk of abandonment, violence, and death, while their access to safety and recovery support is limited. Actions need to be undertaken by public health and social care institutions to provide the disabled with access to professional care.

The language barrier constitutes another challenge that is currently being faced by European healthcare systems. Generally, refugees lack medical documentation, while those who possess it may have documentation only in the Ukrainian language. Healthcare specialists should also be provided with professional medical translators and translation assistance. The allocation of human resources should be optimized. Language barriers should be recognized as one of the main factors that limit healthcare access for refugees. It is also important to acknowledge that the medical professionals amongst the Ukrainian refugees could support the medical care of refugees within the host countries.

The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe calls for European countries to ensure the protection of all refugees [3]. The WHO supports access to vaccinations [3]. For example, in Ukraine, the overall vaccination rate for polio in 2021 was 80%, while in 2020, the overall vaccination coverage for measles vaccines (two doses) was 81.9% [11,12]. However, only 30% of the Ukraine population received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. All vaccination rates are considerably lower than those reported by the neighboring host countries [11,12]. There is increasing difficulty in determining the vaccination status of refugees due to a lack of access to childhood immunization records. The European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) has called for all host countries to ensure vaccination coverage against poliomyelitis, measles, and COVID-19 among Ukrainian refugees [11].

Ukraine also has some of the highest rates in Europe for chronic infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B, and C [12]. In recent decades, international health organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have supported capacity-building interventions for tuberculosis and HIV in Ukraine [13].

The war has disrupted the supply of antiretroviral drugs used for treating HIV and treatments for tuberculosis, which may lead to increased rates and severity of these diseases [12,13]. Access to diagnostic services and ongoing chronic communicable disease care, particularly for HIV and tuberculosis, should be facilitated by the healthcare systems of the hosting countries. To prepare for future mass migration, all European countries should ensure effective disease surveillance and reporting systems, including outbreak investigation, case management, and evaluation of response capacities.

Education has also been affected by the war outbreak. It is estimated that more than 750 schools have been damaged since the conflict began in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 [14]. Sadly, the war has also affected the psychosocial well-being of an entire generation of children. All areas of higher education, including medical education, have been affected. Thousands of medical students have either fled their country or remained in Ukraine to serve in the military, including as paramedics. Ukraine’s medical universities have been popular for international students [15]. It has been estimated that between 18,000 to 20,000 students from India were recently enrolled in 33 medical universities in Ukraine [15]. Because most of these students will return home, medical education poses a challenge because it requires practical training and access to clinical facilities and patients. Ensuring the continuation of medical studies for Ukrainian refugees is a major challenge to the international community.

The WHO has documented at least 43 attacks on hospitals and medical facilities in Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian invasion [16]. More than 300 health facilities are located...
along the conflict lines or in areas under Russian control [16]. Healthcare professionals from Ukraine are also among refugees to European Union member states. Many countries have developed programs to facilitate the work of refugee doctors and nurses within their healthcare systems. There is also a need to establish internships and scholarship programs to aid Ukrainian scientists who have fled the war. Also, public health experts from Ukraine can provide a valuable resource. Training Ukrainian professionals in disease prevention and public health is an important consideration for the post-war era to facilitate the reconstruction of the Ukrainian healthcare system.

The ongoing conflict has highlighted the importance of updating postgraduate medical education programs in many EU countries. Postgraduate medical education programs should now extend their training to treat gunshot wounds, respond to crises, and provide radiation protection. The humanitarian, healthcare and education-related consequences of Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine are of major concern. However, the war has also had a devastating impact on the environment. Ukraine is a highly industrialized country whose infrastructure has been undergoing military attacks resulting in a high risk for environmental pollution, including water and soil pollution. Fuel and chemical spills and heavy metal contamination are byproducts of war that pose a severe risk for the environment [17]. Finally, Ukraine is one of the world’s leading exporters of major grains and vegetable oils [18]. The current war will have a global effect on food and agriculture. The limitations associated with lack of sowing cereals, infrastructure destruction, environmental pollution, and reduced export will significantly affect food supplies [18,19]. Food insecurity and famine may result in some world regions [18,19]. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), the impact of the war in Ukraine on food security will be global and requires an international response [19].

Conclusions

Russia’s recent military invasion of Ukraine calls for an international public health response. The international community must provide humanitarian aid, access to healthcare, social security, food security, and education for the entirety of the Ukrainian refugee population. Also, the public health systems of host countries must be adapted to meet the new challenges. National and international programs must ensure effective disease surveillance and reporting systems, disease outbreak investigation, case management, and response capacities well-prepared for the massive migration of Ukrainian refugees in Europe, particularly in Poland.

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