



TRENDS-in-MEDICINE

BULLETIN:

Unmet Medical Needs in Ukraine

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by Lynne Peterson
with Marina McCusker

“People are going crazy to the point that they are going around in circles and don’t stop until someone takes them somewhere.” That is how Marina McCusker, a 52-year-old medical assistant for a Florida plastic surgeon, described the refugees she saw in Kharkiv, Ukraine, earlier this month.

She also saw quite a few older people – many in wheelchairs – and many people who appeared mentally ill or perhaps just can’t process the war. What she didn’t see: children, “Ninety-nine percent of them are gone. There are no adoptions at the moment. A priest told me not to worry about the children because they have been taken to other, safe countries. There is a real focus on children. They are protecting them, expecting that they will be back.”

Marina, on assignment for *Trends-in-Medicine*, flew to Warsaw, Poland, to join her freelance journalist sister, Maribo Pettit, who was there to report on politics. Then, the women traveled by train to Ukraine.

Their first stop was Lviv, which Marina described as “super clean.” That was a big surprise in the middle of a war. From Lviv, they went on to Kharkiv together by train, where Marina remained while Maribo traveled to Kyiv. “I couldn’t go [to Kyiv]. I didn’t want to expose myself to more. I was getting too involved. And there are a lot of scary checkpoints. What should be an 8-hour trip now takes 16 hours.”

In Kharkiv, a man told Marina, “You get used to the bombs and the sirens, but every time there is an ambulance siren, everyone stands up, and no one moves because they know it is someone else going to the hospital.”

Marina set out to evaluate the situation for first responders treating Ukrainian soldiers injured while defending their homeland to see how she could help.

Many of those first responders or medics are Catholic nuns. It’s an informal network, working well under the radar, but those nuns are saving lives every day. Marina said, “The Catholic church is very involved in the war. It is very underground. They help bring in medical supplies from Poland, and they run an ‘underground hospital’ only for soldiers, where they administer emergency care and then transport the injured soldiers to a safe place.”

Some of what she expected to be a medical problem, wasn’t, and what she didn’t expect to be an issue, was. Medical records, for example, were surprisingly accurate, up-to-date, and easy to access. She also found out that, in war, Covid-19 is “of no concern, zero. It is nothing. The wounded are prioritized over cancer patients.”

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What do they most need? Not medications. Marina said those appeared to be well stocked. The critical shortage was **tourniquets and blood clotting factor**. Plasma would be helpful, but it is too hard to transport to the front lines. “Logistics are very difficult. Anywhere a soldier is, you are close to a bomb,” Marina explained.

“Father Kawa, a Catholic priest at St. Anthony, in Lviv, told me that one tourniquet saves two lives. The problem is that the tourniquets they could get were made in China, and those don’t work. Tourniquets are the most basic lifesaver for Ukrainian soldiers. The heads and torsos of soldiers are protected, but a lot – a lot – of arms are damaged by flying metal. It is like a bullet but worse. They showed me one of the tourniquets that works, and it was an American product.”

As soon as *Trends-in-Medicine* heard about these needs, we reached out to the leading companies for both products. TacMed Solutions, which makes the preferred American tourniquets, the SOF tourniquets, stepped up and immediately shipped 50 of them, the number Father Kawa said they needed for their first responders.

In a statement, TacMed said it is “proud to continue supporting the Ukrainian effort by delivering potentially lifesaving medical supplies to the front lines. It is critical for first responders to operate with proven equipment; counterfeit tourniquets are extremely dangerous and likely to fail when deployed. Quality medical supplies are essential to minimizing loss of life.”

A spokesperson for Teleflex, which makes QuikClot, declined to donate any product, saying they only work with established humanitarian organizations. The church’s basement “hospital” and front-line first responders didn’t qualify. However, John Karpinski, DDS, a Florida dentist, paid for a supply of QuikClot.

The tourniquets and the clotting factor were soon on their way to Ukraine. Thank you, TacMed Solutions and Dr. Karpinski.

Sister Svitlana Matsiuk, who before the war was a teacher, is one of the nuns helping to collect supplies needed for treating the soldiers. She said the regular charities are doing good work but can’t reach many places, including where she is. “For many years there was no war, and no one was prepared when it started, so they didn’t invest anything in military hospitals. Those hospitals had really bad rooms and equipment, and now there are so many injured that make-shift hospitals are being created,” she explained.

“The tourniquets we send to the front; they save their legs and arms when the soldiers are wounded,” she said, adding, “The fighting is so brutal... We have hospitals with wounded soldiers, and most of them have problems with their legs or arms, broken bones.”

Other items that have been requested include orthopedic devices for helping to set broken bones, but some of the requests the nuns got were a bit surprising. One large hospital asked the nuns for “T-shirts and shorts, very simple things... Two weeks ago, a hospital treating soldiers with psychological trauma asked us to find 30 mattresses... One lady brought an air conditioner for the surgery room.”

For Marina, the trip home was unexpectedly scary. She was questioned three times at the airport in Warsaw, but she was finally allowed to board the plane back to the U.S.

“This trip changed my life,” said Marina, who was born in Venezuela but has been an American citizen for many years, adding, “If you go there, you find all the emotions that you can have in life... Venezuela has a dictator, but people hold on. But, in war there is nothing to hold on to... The Ukrainians are thankful to the U.S. for what we give. More than money or weapons, though, they want the war to stop. They love their country, love their freedom, and the loss of freedom is their fear. My trip was not only humanitarian; it was also very religious.”

Would she go back? “Yes, of course,” Marina said, “It is one of the most beautiful countries I have seen...I met so many wonderful people there. It was an amazing experience.” In fact, Marina is going back for 11 days in July to help out in a hospital and to take more medical supplies. She is collecting suture material and anything else she hears they need.

To make a donation (money or supplies), contact the office of Luis Villar, MD, at 772-286-3722.

