"Diseases know no borders": the story of a Moldovan family nurse caring for Ukrainian refugees

"When I first saw a refugee patient, I felt the ground slipping from under my feet. I had very mixed emotions. On the one hand I wanted to scream in pain, but at the same time, I knew I had to concentrate, because my patient needed me."

This is how Maria Roșca, a family nurse in the Republic of Moldova, now working at a refugee centre, responds when asked about her work over the past 2 months caring for Ukrainian refugees. "Diseases know no borders," she adds. "The pain is unbearable for both Moldovans and Ukrainians."

Just recently, Maria found herself helping a bedridden woman who had been transported by her daughter all the way from Ukraine to the Republic of Moldova.

"The lady had multiple diseases and needed urgent medical tests," Maria recalls. "But she was unable to visit a doctor, as she couldn't leave her bed." Maria managed to bring the proper medical equipment to the refugee centre to carry out the needed tests and later take the results to the doctor to get the right prescriptions.

When people move because of war and violence, as is now happening in Ukraine, their health needs move with them. And as the war enters its 11th week with nearly 6 million people having fled, the care provided by health workers in neighbouring countries, such as Maria, has been crucial. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that nearly 450 000 refugees have transited the Republic of Moldova so far, and more than 90 000 are staying in the country.

International Nurses Day, marked every year on 12 May, is a time to renew calls for better investment and support for nurses and the nursing profession.

This year, WHO/Europe is shining a spotlight on the life-saving care provided by nurses in all settings – including in conflict zones or in the midst of refugee crises – with a call to ensure their safety as they care for the vulnerable.

Battling COVID-19 over the past 2 years has been exhausting, Maria admits.

"People were scared, the disease was relentless, and the tasks multiplied over time. It placed enormous pressure on mine and my colleagues' shoulders. But through hard work around the clock, I managed to cope with all waves of the pandemic."

Throughout the pandemic, WHO/Europe has reiterated the need to support the mental health of all health workers. As frontline workers, they have faced stress, burnout, sickness and loss, with potentially long-term effects on their mental well-being.

As Maria explains, the pandemic has also been a test of health workers' endurance.

"I think it also prepared me for managing the current refugee crisis," she says. "The centre where I work opened as soon as the conflict broke out, and we have been supporting refugees since day one."

Over the past 2 months, Maria has cared for many mothers with their children.

"I could see that some of them had dressed in a hurry; some wore their clothes inside out," she recalls. "I noticed fear, anxiety and horror in their eyes, in their behaviour and their voices. I can't even imagine what they went through."

Before the war in Ukraine, Maria was working as a family nurse in the village of Popeasca, where a little more than 2300 people live. Together with the family doctor, who comes twice a week from another town, she is the only health-care professional in her community.

"It all came out of a burning desire to help people and to feel useful, and now I know my community's stories, their pains, their fears," she says. Her work as a nurse, she adds, extends beyond the walls of her clinic.

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