Getting emergency medical supplies to where they are needed most: interview with Olexander Babanin on the logistics of WHO support to Ukraine

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Olexander Babanin is Logistics and Operations Officer for WHO, and is responsible for organizing the transportation of essential medical supplies and equipment from storage facilities to locations across the world. In this interview, Olexander explains how WHO decides which supplies are needed, how they are distributed and how they might be used, in the particular context of Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine has not only badly damaged or destroyed many health facilities, but it has disrupted supply chains of medical supplies to affected areas. Domestic production of supplies has been curtailed by bombings. Supplies are needed, not just to treat those injured in the conflict, but to care for many trapped in the country without access to medication, including those with chronic conditions such as hypertension and diabetes.

Most supplies come from WHO's central logistics hub, located in Dubai's International Humanitarian City. The hub was established in 2016 to aid global preparedness and response to emergencies, and allows vital medical supplies and equipment to be stored and rapidly dispatched in response to health emergencies all over the world. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the hub grew rapidly to manage 85% of WHO's medical commodity response. WHO is also receiving individual shipments of specific supplies for Ukraine from vendors all over the world. These arrive in Warsaw, Poland via air and road and are then driven across the border into Ukraine.

WHO is working with partners to deliver hundreds of tonnes of life-saving equipment and medication to Ukraine. WHO emergency supplies include standard medical kits; oxygen and oxygen generators; transfusion kits; electrical generators; cold chain elements (e.g. fridges); defibrillators (for heart attacks); monitors; ventilators; ambulances; and personal protective equipment, including chemical protection suits.

WHO is also supplying Ukraine with hundreds of trauma and emergency surgery kits (TESKs) that can be used for performing operations on up to 50 patients, as well as interagency emergency health kits (IEHKs)

Trauma kits help local surgeons, clinicians and nursing staff carry out life- and limb-saving procedures. They are particularly needed during conflict situations, when the quality of care and rapid treatment of wounds is crucial for significantly reducing the chance of death and lifelong disabilities. In war zones, the environment in which this care is delivered, and the complexity of wounds that require treatment can be challenging, but the versatility of trauma kits means they can be used even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Within these kits, therefore, we include:

The IEHKs provide essential medicines and medical devices to fill immediate medical gaps for up to 10 000 people for approximately 3 months, including treatments for cardiovascular and pulmonary diseases and diabetes.

WHO/Europe’s Operational Supply and Logistics (OSL) team, together with headquarters’ OSL team, organize convoys of needed supplies from WHO stock in Dubai and from other distribution centres via Poland to Ukraine.

The WHO Country Office in Ukraine receives and stores supplies upon arrival and organizes distribution according to a plan agreed with the Ministry of Health.

The Ukrainian Ministry of Health constantly updates the Country Office on evolving needs, and liaises to distribute supplies to health departments at oblast level as soon as they arrive.

The supplies are then distributed to every corner of the country,

reaching both acutely and chronically ill people, those injured in the ongoing war and those needing care for a range of chronic conditions.

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