The role of Emergency Medical Teams in the health response to the Ukraine war

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Emergency Medical Teams (EMTs) are an important part of the global health workforce. They provide extra surge capacity and expertise to countries in response to disasters and health emergencies. Consisting of doctors, nurses, paramedics and other health professionals from across the world, the teams are rapidly deployed to help patients during disease outbreaks, sudden onset disasters – and now, the war in Ukraine.

“The first EMTs were deployed to Ukraine and its neighbouring countries in the first weeks following the invasion of Ukraine,” explains Oleg Storozhenko, WHO/Europe’s EMT Focal Point. “They have been integrated into health facilities at refugee centres, in primary health care facilities and in ministries of health. In all my career, I have never witnessed such a united and strong expression of interest from EMT members, keen to volunteer their services to help the people of Ukraine.”

A key feature of the EMTs is their self-sufficiency – all team members are fully trained, have the skills appropriate for the situation, and bring with them their own equipment and supplies, to avoid adding a burden on the already stretched national health systems of the countries they operate in.

Professor Johan von Schreeb leadstheCentre for Research on Health Care in Disasters, a WHO collaborative centre, and explains how the EMTs are a complement to Ukraine’s existing health services. “The emergency medical teams initiative started after the Haiti earthquake in 2010. It now serves as a quality-assured and coordinated global system, like an emergency number that affected countries can call to get clinical surge capacity when needed. Prior to the war, Ukraine had a well-functioning health system, with a lot of skilled doctors, but the system is under great pressure due to increasing numbers of

complex injured people; damage to, as well as attacks on, health facilities; restricted supply lines; as well as the displacement of millions of people. This means that additional support is needed from EMTs. They have a key role to play in filling the gaps in the health system and helping build Ukrainian response capacities."

Dr Olivier Hagon is Team Lead for the specialized Mother and Child EMT, deployed by Swiss Humanitarian Aid to support the Republic of Moldova health system. "For part of our deployment we have been based at the MoldExpo convention center, which has been converted into temporary accommodation for up to 450 refugees coming from Ukraine," he says. "We are providing health services to mothers, and pregnant and breastfeeding women. We are also treating children who are commonly suffering from gastroenteritis and lung infections. By being here, we are relieving pressures on the national health system – allowing Moldova's doctors and nurses to return to the hospitals where they are also needed. In addition, we are playing a vital capacity-building role, training up local medical students and sharing our expertise through on-the-job training. This is needed, not just now, but also so they can play an active part in the recovery phase once the war is over."

From the beginning of June, the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) is planning the deployment of a Rapid Response Mobile Laboratory to the Republic of Moldova to support national treatment centres and EMTs in responding to the current crisis. The lab will support treatment centres with basic clinical diagnostics, and provide on-request capacities for diagnosing pathogens of common concern in the area, such as measles, polio and COVID-19.

WHO leads and coordinates the EMT initiative globally, with more than half of the EMT workforce located in the WHO European Region.

When health-related crises happen, WHO assists the ministries of health of affected countries to coordinate the arrival, registration, licensing, reception and tasking of EMTs, integrating them into the existing health system to help build national capacities for preparedness and response.

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