

"We risk dying when going to work" – Ukrainian nurse shares her message on Nurses' Day



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"When the explosions first went off on 24 February, I turned up the volume of my children's TV cartoons, so that they wouldn't hear the noise. I was very much in doubt whether to stay or leave, but as a medical surgical nurse, I quickly realized that my skills were needed here. So, I stayed."

Tetiana Freishyn has been a nurse for 17 years, with most of these spent in surgery. Since the war in Ukraine started, she has been working in the trauma and orthopedics department at the city hospital in Ivano-Frankivsk, in the west of the country.

On 12 May, WHO/Europe marks International Nurses Day with a call to secure the safety of nurses like Tetiana and her colleagues – everywhere. As of 8 May, WHO has confirmed 200 attacks on health care in Ukraine since the war's outbreak, which have led to 75 deaths and 54 injuries. Attacks on health care include attacks on health facilities, transport, personnel, patients, supplies and warehouses. When people are prevented from seeking health care, either because the facilities have been destroyed or out of fear that they may become a target, they lose hope. The mental health toll wreaked by the war cannot be underestimated, affecting civilians and health workers alike.

Tetiana says that, although her ward in Ivano-Frankivsk has so far been spared, the working conditions have been challenging.

"The psychological burden is huge because the workload is heavier, and at the same time I am concerned for the safety of my children and my husband," she explains.

When faced with the choice of staying or leaving in the midst of conflict, maintaining motivation can be difficult. But being a nurse with highly needed skills is what keeps Tetiana going.

“My nursing profession is my life; it’s what gets me out of bed every day; it’s the state of my soul,” she says, adding that her message to all nurses on International Nurses Day is one of peace.

“No one should have to be a nurse during a conflict, and I wish for all nurses to be able to go to work with joy. The health care profession is a peaceful one, and I hope that we can all go to work peacefully. As it is now, we risk dying when going to work.”

Tetiana says the attacks have gone beyond hospitals.

“We’ve seen attacks on ambulances, and quite a number of health care professionals have died in the line of duty,” she shares. “Nurses shouldn’t die while performing their medical duties.”

The realities of the war have led to a series of new professional challenges for Tetiana and her colleagues.

“The recurrent air alarms mean that you never know when your work is interrupted. We get a lot of open wound fractures caused by the ongoing violence. These are quite different compared to regular leg fractures, so we quickly need to upgrade our skills.”

Of course, another consequence of the conflict has been the high number of internally displaced people.

“Some of them are skilled health care professionals who come to work with us. We highly appreciate their help, and taking on new colleagues and functioning as a team adds to the number of things we need to adjust to,” Tetiana explains.

Like millions of nurses all over the globe, Tetiana continues to provide lifesaving care to people in need. Nurses’ ability to practice and apply their skills is not only an opportunity to safeguard access to decent work; around the world the vast majority of nurses are female, so investment in nursing is also an investment in women and their role in global public health.

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