

Caring for people with diabetes and non-communicable diseases in Ukraine: a humanitarian emergency

As war in Europe becomes a reality with the armed conflict in Ukraine, the global community has responded politically and economically, and is in the midst of preparing a large-scale humanitarian response. The first response needs to reach individuals who are directly affected by the conflict and those who are fleeing to neighbouring countries, and address health, food, water, and shelter needs. Nevertheless, with 90.5% of mortality and 81.7% of disability-adjusted life-years¹ in Ukraine due to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), the response for the Ukrainian population must also include NCD care as a priority.

For people living with NCDs in humanitarian settings, continuity of care and access to medicines are essential.² With the ongoing conflict, curfews, destruction of health facilities, and focus on acute trauma cases, people with NCDs might be unable to access the medicines and care that they need. For people with diabetes in humanitarian emergencies, different needs have been identified for distinct populations, such as refugees, individuals who are internally displaced, and people who remain in the community, where an influx of people can disrupt the system.³ The media has already started to report the impact of the conflict on people with NCDs, with a specific mention of young children with cancer.⁴ Similarly, there should be serious concern for people with diabetes, as reports of shortages in basic and life-saving medical provisions emerge.⁵

Reports from other humanitarian crises highlight increased mortality both during and after the event, due to

disruption in services, stress, injuries, and mental health.⁶ Therefore, beyond medical responses for pregnant women and the physical health needs of individuals who are injured or have acute or chronic somatic conditions, the humanitarian response must also address mental health needs. Children, families separated due to conflict, individuals who have witnessed the conflict directly, and parties to the conflict will all require their mental health needs to be met beyond any other health-related responses.

In the short term, we call on all parties of the conflict to respect international humanitarian law and to protect health infrastructure and health-care workers. Pledges of economic and military support to Ukraine from governments globally will need to be complemented with ongoing assistance to rebuild the health infrastructure that was destroyed. As a Ukrainian proverb describes, "a gift given at a time of need gives double." Until the end of the conflict, humanitarian actors, civil society, academics, governments, and citizens need to stand by the Ukrainian population and offer unwavering support to alleviate their humanitarian and medical needs.

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