

Editorial

The impact on health of a war in Europe

Simon Attard Montalto

No sooner than the pandemic appeared to have reached some semblance of control (barring the emergence of yet another, and potentially more aggressive variant), Russia launched an all-out invasion of its neighboring country, Ukraine. The dire impact on lives, infrastructure and property to the Ukrainian people has already been enormous and shows no signs of abating. Indeed, the possibility of this war (how else can it be described?) escalating and 'spilling over' to other adjoining countries is very real and seriously raises the spectre of yet another world war, again with its epicentre in Europe. Even without further escalation, the destabilisation of the Ukrainian population has already resulted in the greatest refugee crisis facing Europe, presently being 'managed' by the impressive rallying of support being offered by many European countries, within and outside of the EU. Unless there is a timely cessation of hostilities and the senseless loss of life and wanton destruction in Ukraine stops, this refugee crisis threatens to overwhelm the support services. Poland, geographically a direct neighbour of Ukraine and, to-date, the greatest recipient of refugees has asked other countries to offload some of its burden.¹ To-date, this has occurred, for example, for specific subgroups with special health needs such as children receiving treatment for malignant diseases who have been transferred onwards to other countries including Malta.² The continued disruption or total breakdown of community-based health services such as vaccination programmes in Ukraine (for now) will risk the emergence of hitherto controlled infections and encourage the emergence of new pathogens.³ New COVID variants are certainly not exempt from this scenario.

Cover Picture:

'Autumn hues'

Oil pastel painting

By Mariella Scerri

Mariella Scerri is a teacher of English and is also reading for a PhD in Medical Humanities with University of Leicester. Painting is a newly found hobby she discovered during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020. Her preferred medium is oil pastel drawing and she derives inspiration from landscapes and seascapes.

Professor Simon Attard Montalto

Editor, Malta Medical Journal
Head, Department of Paediatrics
The Medical School
Msida, Malta
simon.attard-montalto@gov.mt

Ukraine and Russia are major exporters of pesticides and crop fertilizers as well being leading wheat growing and exporting countries in the world and collapse of this crop alone is already having far reaching effects on the price of staple food products.⁴ Similarly, a significant curtailment in the availability of natural gas (40-45% of imported gas is supplied to Europe from Russia, now a pariah state on whom severe sanctions have been imposed), will create a significant economic 'hit'.⁵ Although Malta does not source most of its fuel directly from Russia, it relies heavily on other European countries that do. Bypassing all Russian goods and supplies and seeking alternative sources will take time to set up and take effect. In the meantime, economic recession and austerity measures may remain the order of the day for sometime to come, with inevitable knock-on

effects on supplies, pharmaceuticals and healthcare in general.⁶

It is not surprising, therefore, that many champions of Healthcare such as the Royal College of Physicians, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, UK, The European Resuscitation Council, The Malta Medical Association and countless others have deplored the events in Ukraine and appealed for peace and a return to normality. This is a totally unnecessary and senseless war that is resulting in a deplorable loss of life, presently in the Ukraine but one that threatens the whole of Europe. Malta, even if not involved directly in the fighting, will not be exempt at least from indirect repercussions on its economy and compromise to the standard of Healthcare that we enjoy today.

REFERENCES

1. "We can't take any more refugees": Polish cities call on government to seek EU and UN help. Poland Today, March 2022.
<https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/03/11/we-cant-take-any-more-refugees-polish-cities-call-on-government-to-seek-eu-and-un-help/>
2. Ukrainian children brought to England for cancer treatment. Gov.UK, March, 2022.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ukrainian-children-brought-to-england-for-cancer-treatment>
3. Leon DA, Jdanov D, Gerry CJ, Grigoriev P, Jasilionis D, McKee M, et al. The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and its public Health consequences. Lancet, 8, 2022.
[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanepi/article/PIIS2666-7762\(22\)00051-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanepi/article/PIIS2666-7762(22)00051-5/fulltext)
4. Smith O. Ukraine food giant MHP warns of 'catastrophic' risk to food supply BBC News. March 2022.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-60691719>
5. Green News. What happens if Russia shuts off gas supplies to Europe? February 2022.
<https://www.euronews.com/green/2022/02/24/what-happens-if-russia-shuts-off-gas-supplies-to-europe>
6. Putka S. War in Ukraine may disrupt medical supply chain. MedPage Today, March 2022.
<https://www.medpagetoday.com/special-reports/exclusives/97502>