

## Children, life-threatening disease, and war

As a pediatric oncologist I follow the events in Ukraine with special concern for the children who have been diagnosed with cancer and had their treatment interrupted due to the war. Children, whether they have an illness or not, are always vulnerable when their usual environment is disrupted, whether this is due to such drastic changes as an armed conflict or a pandemic that prevents them from going to school and interacting with their friends.

For example, leukemia, especially acute lymphoblastic leukemia, one of the most common childhood cancers, is curable in most patients, but requires strict adherence to treatment given intravenously or orally. Missing even a few doses or a prolonged delay can decrease the likelihood of cure. Imagine having to pack all your medications or refill your prescriptions while at the same time trying to get the last train out of your besieged city! And even if you can do so, will the medications still be available? Drug shortages are common even without wars or other disruptive events!

Other children might need radiotherapy or surgery, and many may need antibiotics, artificial nutrition, or special wound care. Patients undergoing chemotherapy are vulnerable to infections, a situation that is difficult to avoid when they are forced to sleep in a subway station or are crammed into a train with hundreds of other people, even when there is no concurrent pandemic.

In times of war, just like in a pandemic, access to care may no longer be possible, or may be complicated if patients are suddenly in a different country as a refugee. They and their caregivers may not speak the language, may not have their medical records and treatment plans to share with medical personnel, or the necessary medications may have different names, all making it difficult to continue the therapeutic regimen.

The current situation in Ukraine is especially heartbreaking, since families are torn apart, with fathers not being able to leave the country, and the confusion that comes with an unexpected need to evacuate. Cancer is scary but adding the emotional upheaval of war leads to unimaginable trauma for both children and adults.

What can we do to help and keep these patients as safe as possible (after all, it is patient safety week!)? The options to help within Ukraine are extremely limited but when these children and their family members do get to a new place where they can continue their treatment, we can use the experience we have with treating displaced cancer patients after a hurricane or other disaster. Healthcare organizations can make resources available such as guidelines, help define alternate treatments, devices, or medications, and provide a psychologically safe environment for the displaced children and families. Patient safety includes not only giving quality care but also providing a healing environment to give all children a chance to grow up to be healthy adults!