

***Adjusting Laboratory Practices to the Challenges of Wartime***

*Oksana Sulaieva, Anna Shcherbakova, Oleksandr Dudin*

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**Abstract**

After 500 days of the unjust war initiated by the Russians, we look back to reflect on the challenges our medical laboratory faced during these early days. On the morning of February 24<sup>th</sup>, we were awakened by the dreadful roar of sirens, the sound of which filled us with adrenaline and anxiety. Although our team had considered the risks of Russian military aggression and thus updated our emergency plan at the beginning of 2022, the first day of the war revealed that nobody was truly ready for the bombing, air alarms, tanks on the streets of towns and cities, violence and murders of civilians. That morning the city's transportation system collapsed, and the flow of cars cluttered all the roads as people were trying to leave the city and escape the upcoming atrocities and death. Serious and disquieted people hurried along the streets—some people rushed to shelters, and others went to the military registration and enlistment offices to fight against Russian aggressors for the life, independence, and sovereignty of Ukraine.

We hurried to work, committed to performing our duties. Our medical laboratory serves more than 750 hospitals in Ukraine. Despite fear and uncertainty, we walked to the lab, taking our children and alarm case<sup>1</sup> with documents and essential things. Months later, people asked us why we went to the laboratory instead of leaving the city or even the country. At that moment, our **[End Page 155]** professional duties were an anchor linking us to each other against fear and panic. Our responsibility to provide patients and physicians with the results of blood testing, pathology, and molecular reports outweighed our fears of the war. We had to complete the testing of all the samples delivered to the laboratory to provide our customers—who include children, pregnant women, diabetic and cancer patients—with data essential for identifying accurate diagnoses and effective treatments. So we spent the first days of the war in the laboratory. At the same time, we had obligations and responsibilities to our staff as well. We had to consider how to manage our employees' protection along with continuous laboratory services provided under endless air alarms and bombings. Many healthcare facilities in eastern regions and around Kyiv were affected by missiles or completely destroyed. Of our sixty laboratory offices around Ukraine, ten were damaged or abandoned

due to occupation. Several of our fleet cars were also damaged and riddled with bullets. Many employees in the regional offices in Melitopol, Kherson, Mariupol, Chernihiv, and in suburbs of Kyiv such as Bucha and Irpin lost their homes as a result of massive military operations or occupation. Dozens of our employees joined the Ukrainian armed forces to defend civilians and fight against aggressors. Many others became volunteers, involved in blood donation, medical care for the wounded, cooking, and serving the troops. And still, we had to continue our work and protect our staff at the same time. We also helped each other by sharing our goods, medication, homes, cars, warmth, and support. Some pathologists stayed at the workplace for several days moving between pathology stations, microscopes and shelters, and sleeping on the floor but continuing to work.

Our main challenge was the regular terroristic attacks on healthcare facilities situated far away from the front line, which in fact, violated international humanitarian law regarding respect for human rights during armed conflicts. During the first weeks of the war, the magnitude of military aggression, massive bombing, and air attacks undermined the healthcare system and endangered laboratory staff and patients. We prioritized protective measures. Some of our laboratory staff and facilities were evacuated from Kyiv to Lviv in western Ukraine. The partial relocation of our laboratory to Lviv was also driven by the displacement of several million Ukrainians to the western part of the country.

We were able to arrange relatively safe accommodations for our laboratory employees and their families in Lviv. Under strikes and alarms, our...

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from afar to mobilise medical teams to respond. There is little satisfaction in this if I cannot be there with them, helping, serving, accompanying.

I decide to bake a cake.

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Winter, Spring, Autumn, Summer, Any Day:  
How We Keep Caring

Living here and working here as a doctor brings physical and mental burdens. The crushing exhaustion, the personal risks, the harrowing choices, the helplessness, the guilt, the unworthiness, the terror of seeing death and becoming dead. We all need a break. We all need a holiday. We all need to go outside. *Where can we even go? Who is looking after us?*

But the burden and the dread are always swallowed by the deepest urge to care. Because it is within us. Because we do not want to see their families grieve. Because their families *are* us. Because we love. Because that is what we have to do. What alternative do we have?

We must keep caring while walking through our pain.

Autumn 2023 Now: How Can We Keep Caring?

This was all before. The now has changed everything.

I have doctor friends who have died under bombs whilst holding their children or their mothers. I have doctor friends forced to choose between remaining with patients and evacuating their families. Those who stay work to save lives, triage injuries and write the names of babies on the torsos of tiny lifeless bodies, over, and over. Without supplies, sleep, food or water, without their homes left standing, with nothing left but their grace and their humanity.

As doctors in Gaza now, we weep an unbearable grief. We no longer know if we can keep caring.



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<sup>1</sup> An alarm case is a portable kit containing items that are important or would help a person survive during an escape or evacuation.