

# The role of a medical doctor in war-thoughts over Russian soldiers and Ukraine

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## Introduction

In 1992, I interviewed for both medical school and the Malawi Army to join my country's medical corps in preparation for a military hospital that was soon to be established. From that time many things changed. Although I graduated from medical school, I did not become a military doctor. I have fond images of what it would have been, had my dreams of joining the uniformed forces of my country come to fruition. Of course we will never know how things would have turned out. Instead, I worked briefly in the civil service and later joined the College of Medicine of the University of Malawi<sup>1</sup>, which currently is the Kamuzu University of Health Sciences- the topic of my previous editorial<sup>2</sup>.

About a decade ago, having been impressed by the socio-economic progress that the former Soviet state of Ukraine had achieved since the breakup of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), my colleagues and I conducted a secondary analysis of the Global Youth Tobacco Survey 2005 of Ukraine. This work was eventually published<sup>3</sup>. Little did we know that this same country, for which we had immersed ourselves with its data, would one day face one of the most existential threats in my generation. Yet, this is so, and as I write this editorial, Ukraine is fighting for its existence against one of the mightiest armies the world has ever seen.

## Ukraine and Russian soldiers

The title of this editorial has been intentional, may be more intentional than it should have been, i.e. The role of a medical doctor in war-thoughts over Russian soldiers and Ukraine. Of particular note is that I have referred to "Ukraine" in its entirety- all of Ukraine (its people and its country)- while for Russia, presently the foreseeable harm is for the military which is on Ukrainian soil. Ukrainian are facing great danger, while for Russia, it is the soldiers in Ukraine. Russian civilians, as far as we can currently tell, are not facing such an existential threat as are the Ukrainian civilians.

## Public Health consequences of war

Armed conflict has been described as a public health problem<sup>4</sup>. War is what students of global health, sadly, study, discuss and hope it will not happen, yet in this world where power often ends up being misused and not for the service of humanity, war is inevitable. War is both senseless and needless, created by adults (often old men) and heavily affecting children<sup>5</sup>, people living with disabilities, the elderly and other vulnerable groups. The health consequences of war are not just felt when there is active combat, but linger

on into the future as a consequences of personal and group trauma (include experience with severe violence, separation and loss), destruction of health systems, and in the present circumstances, when the global economy was just starting to revive following the havoc that Covid-19 wreaked, and peoples' ways of life.

## Medical doctors and war

From time to time, and whether it was in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria or Ukraine, doctors find themselves in the heart of war. They face personal, family and professional ethical challenges whether they are military doctors or civilian doctors. They face ethical and self-preservation questions. For instance, while hostilities are happening, should a civilian doctor stay behind to provide medical care when other civilians are leaving the country? For those doctors who are part of their countries' military forces their responsibilities are cut out for them. For instance, the motto of the US Army Medical Corps is instructive, i.e. "to conserve the fighting strength". Medical doctors function as part of the effort-to keep their army in great shape for more combat and eventual victory-that is, to make their side continue inflicting harm against the enemy forces. In the case of Syria, Dr Bashar al-Assad was the Commander-in-Chief, being the president of the country.

The above notwithstanding, military doctors have contributed in other ways to the improvement of the welfare of humanity. In 1707, Moscow Military Hospital was founded by Peter the Great. Nikolai Ivanovich Pirogov, who was a graduate of this military academy developed methods of general anaesthesia for the battlefield and a triage system for the evacuation of the wounded<sup>6,7</sup>. Another graduate from the same institution, Ivan Petrovich Pavlov, developed the nervous reflex theory<sup>8</sup>. The presentation of great contributions by Pirogov and Pavlov will stand in stark comparison to the ongoing hostilities being experienced in Ukraine following the Russian invasion of Thursday, 24th February 2022.

## A call for action

We may wish to remind ourselves that The International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and its US Affiliate, Physicians for Social Responsibility received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985. Fourteen years later (in 1999), it was Doctors without Borders turn for their work in both human-made and natural disasters. Sadly, the work for these Nobel Laureate did not finish with their receipt of the Peace Prizes. In fact, the world regressed significantly on 24th

February this year when a global nuclear power decided to go to war against Ukraine in earnest. Medical Journal Editors and doctors cannot sit on the fence when world peace has been severely compromise. The immediate cessation of hostilities and the return to the negotiation table is vital for not just global peace, but also global health. Prof Leslie London et al in their Lancet article, held that doctors be bearers of peace and speak out when humanity is threatened by the self-destructive tendencies against itself<sup>8</sup>.

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