

U.S. Schools of Public Health Join Together to Demand the Protection of Health Care Workers in Ukraine and Beyond

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The Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health has endorsed this statement and is calling on its members to do the same. New cosigners will be added as they are confirmed.

It has been more than 150 years since international law first required that combatants refrain from attacking hospitals, ambulances, the wounded and sick, and health workers. But this protection is regularly breached. In Ukraine, the Ministry of Health reports that Russia has made more than 60 attacks on hospitals, emergency responders, ambulances, and health workers since beginning its brutal invasion in February. The World Health Organization has confirmed more than 30 of these assaults, and it continues its work to verify the others. Russia is not a first-time offender, having bombed hospitals in Chechnya and Syria. And it is not the sole aggressor. In recent years, health facilities and health workers in conflicts worldwide have been attacked about 1,000 times each year.

Public health infrastructures are threatened by such attacks, both in the moment and for years thereafter. Hospitals are, of course, essential for patient care, and when damaged or destroyed when they are needed most, the traumatic injuries and other immediate health consequences of war go untreated. The harm often persists far beyond this immediate impact. The health workforce, the backbone of the health system, is frequently decimated as doctors and nurses are forced to flee. People in need of care or life-saving treatment, including those who are giving birth, often avoid coming to health facilities for fear of attack, increasing risk of death. Childhood immunizations, an essential part of public health, decline when vaccinators cannot do their jobs safely.

Russia must cease its attacks on Ukraine's health care facilities, as must perpetrators of attacks on health care in ongoing conflicts throughout the world. All those who have a stake in health and human rights should be prepared to take action. Together, we can push for domestic reforms of the law, advocate for improved local investigations, and work to build stronger constituencies to foster greater political will to advance protections.

And we must have accountability for these unjustified attacks. Perpetrators of this violence should be charged with war crimes, face public trials, and, if convicted, should be imprisoned for their heinous acts. Until this happens, unprovoked violence against health care facilities will continue.

We demand the protection and respect of public health and health care workers even during times of war. We stand in solidarity with all of our colleagues who are dedicated to preserving the lives of their patients and the health of the entire population.

Cosigners,

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