The Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered an enormous humanitarian crisis that has inflicted, and continues to inflict, deep and enduring harms on human health. One of the groups most heavily affected, including the greatest impacts on health and wellbeing, is children.

Prior to the outbreak of war, child health in Ukraine was heavily burdened by concerning rates of infant mortality, low provision of routine vaccinations, and high prevalence of infectious diseases including multidrug-resistant tuberculosis. As such, the country’s over-stretched and under-reformed health system, which is officially state-funded yet considerably supplemented by out-of-pocket payments, was poorly positioned to respond to the additional burdens of child health created by the war.

SEPARATED FAMILIES
Russian aggression has so far triggered over 13 million Ukrainians to flee their homes, including 5.4 million refugees who now reside in neighbouring European countries to the west of Ukraine, and 7.7 million internally displaced people who have left their homes but remain in Ukraine. The majority of these migrants are women and children, because the imposition of martial law on 24 February 2022, in preparation for potential military conscription, prohibits male citizens aged 18 to 60 years from leaving the country. As such, tens of thousands of families have been separated, and many children migrate unaccompanied, as parents remain at home to preserve the household income and dispatch their children westward towards areas of safety.

Before escaping Russian hostilities, many children are forced to shelter for extended periods in crowded, cold, and unventilated spaces that are patently unfit for human habitation. Consequently, they now suffer from infections, infestations, and musculoskeletal disorders, as well as a significant burden of acute illness, uncontrolled chronic disease, poor sanitation and hygiene, dehydration and malnutrition, psychological injury, and mental health deterioration. After managing to escape to safer locations, hundreds of thousands of children now reside in temporary evacuee centres fashioned from repurposed schools, nurseries, and gymnasiums. Conditions in these facilities are often cramped and unheated, creating optimal conditions for transmission of respiratory infections in groups of children with poor initial health.

HEALTH SERVICES UNDER STRAIN
War has significantly disrupted the provision of health care across the whole of Ukraine, but most intensely in those areas directly impacted by hostilities and in those regions receiving huge numbers of internally displaced people. The health systems operating in beleaguered cities have largely collapsed, often as a result of deliberate targeting by Russian forces, while native healthcare professionals have fled to safety, and humanitarian assistance is increasingly unable to access the most desperate locations because of intolerable security risks. Simultaneously, the vast migration of internally displaced people places an immense and increasing strain on existing health services, which further concentrates the elevated burden of disease in a struggling health system, and raises additional barriers to accessing the health care that is of paramount importance to children’s health and wellbeing. These barriers to health care may be even more challenging in those children now living as refugees, who face language barriers, unfamiliarity with the receiving country's health system, and lack of knowledge regarding their rights and entitlements to accessing services. As such, the provision of routine child health care has been enormously disrupted. Primary care baby checks, health visitor reviews, and routine vaccination programmes have largely been suspended, meaning the physical health needs, growth and development assessments, and safeguarding frameworks central to children’s health have been greatly neglected.

CHRONIC DISEASES
The disruption to health services, and the vast migration of people, have also caused substantial harm to the management of childhood chronic diseases. Many children were forced to flee their homes without warning and with only what they were able to carry by hand. Without an adequate stockpile of regular medications, and the absence of a reliable supply from their new region’s health system, continued control of chronic diseases including...
The impacts on child health
War in Ukraine:
repeated and exacerbated by war.
migration towards the west creates
separation of families, and mass human
take up arms to defend their cities.7 While
bombardment and artillery fire, or opted to
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In many cases, clinicians were unable to
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some oncology patients were evacuated
care — particularly the maintenance of their
health and wellbeing — who pay one of the
largest and most deeply unjust costs for the
health and wellbeing — who pay one of the
departure of birth in being born in Ukraine.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DAMAGE
The psychological impacts of the Russian
invasion — triggered by sheltering from
bombardment, migrating from homes,
having families separated, witnessing the
destruction of communities, and suffering
the death of family members and friends — are hugely destabilising, especially in
children. Upon the outbreak of war, all
schools across Ukraine were immediately
closed and classroom learning replaced
with online instruction. The harmful
impacts of such interruptions to children’s
academic learning, and perhaps more
importantly to their social development and mental
wellbeing, were revealed by the lockdowns mandated
in response to COVID-19, which are now likely to be
repeated and exacerbated by war.

asthma, epilepsy, and type 1 diabetes is an
enormous threat to child health. In addition,
without a formal transfer of specialist care,
many children under outpatient review
face interruptions in their management
before they can be instated into the
receiving region’s system. Navigating this
process is a significant challenge, but, in
the current context of collapsing health
systems, separated families, and children
often migrating alone, the impacts on child
health are likely to be severe.

For as long as the war in Ukraine continues, the humanitarian crisis it creates
will continue to deepen. And while they play
no part in geopolitical games, it is children
— particularly the maintenance of their
health and wellbeing — who pay one of the
largest and most deeply unjust costs for the
accident of birth in being born in Ukraine.

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