

Amid a 'huge collective trauma,' a Harvard program aims to train Ukrainian doctors

By **Danny McDonald** Globe Staff, Updated February 2, 2023, 6:40 p.m.



Dr. Dariia Simchuk is part of a Harvard fellowship program that is offering six months of training to Ukrainian doctors. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

CAMBRIDGE — Dr. Dariia Simchuk flips through photos and videos on her phone of her hometown, Zhytomyr, about 85 miles west of Kyiv.

They are vignettes of a country at war: buildings reduced to gray piles of rubble; windows of a hospital blown out by nearby explosions and patched up with plywood; an operating room with sandbags stacked in it for extra protection in case of an attack.

“It is a huge, collective trauma for all Ukrainians,” she said of the ongoing conflict while seated in a cafe amid the Monday morning bustle of Harvard Square.

Since October, Simchuk has lived with a family in Dorchester’s Ashmont neighborhood while participating in a Harvard fellowship program aimed at training Ukrainian doctors across a wide spectrum of needs as the war continues to strain the country’s health care system.

The conflict has forced primary care physicians, for instance, to be trauma experts, and the Harvard program aims to help train doctors for mass casualty events. It also offers education in a wide range of medical disciplines, such as oncology, diabetes, mental health, and infectious diseases.

Simchuk, a 28-year-old anesthesiologist, was traveling back to Ukraine on Thursday to do what she can to help, her skills sharpened and her medical know-how expanded. Through the program, she undertook trauma medicine training at Beth Israel Deaconess and shadowed anesthesiologists, surgeons, intensive care doctors, and emergency medicine physicians at Brigham and Women’s Hospital.

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“In medicine, I can save someone’s life, change someone’s life,” said Simchuk. “It gives you motivation because you really feel you are needed.”

Simchuk is the first of seven observers from Ukraine to complete the program, a partnership between the [Scholars at Risk Program](#) at Harvard and [Heal Ukraine Group](#), an organization set up to “respond to the most immediate needs of colleagues on the ground in Ukraine and medical scholars whom we sponsor to come to the US for training opportunities.”

Jane Unrue, director of the Scholars at Risk Program, said the initiative is necessary.

“Everyone thinks that supplies are needed, and they are. But it’s really training — they need training, that’s what’s needed most,” she said.

Unrue is hoping for a second round of funding to continue the program. Harvard’s office of the president funded the first round of fellowships with \$150,000.

Dr. Mark C. Poznansky, a physician at Massachusetts General Hospital and a Harvard Medical School professor, is one of the driving organizers behind the program. He hopes the initiative will have a ripple effect.

“They’re all committed to go back — they want to go back and train the next generation . . . based on what has been done here,” he said.

Dr. Nelya Melnitchouk, a Ukrainian-American who moved to the United States when she was 18 and is a surgeon at Brigham and Women’s, said the idea behind the program is for doctors to “bring something back to Ukraine,” where war casualties continue to strain the medical system, as does internal displacement, with residents fleeing their homes for more peaceful locales.

Additionally, the brutal realities of war have meant that much of the existing medical training in the country has shifted online. But even that has become a problem, with [power outages](#) a recurring [issue](#).

Melnitchouk described occasional feelings of guilt for being here when her homeland continues to be ripped apart. She spoke of the balance between wanting to know relatives are OK, particularly after bombings, but also not wanting to be intrusive. And there's the internal tension between wanting to go and help Ukrainians but needing to raise her two kids.

"When it's your own country, you cannot describe it," she said. "It's a huge shock — you cannot even comprehend."

Simchuk recalled having similar feelings of guilt when she first came to Boston more than three months ago. While she enjoyed exploring the United States — cross-country skiing in Vermont, dining in Portland, Maine, sight-seeing in New York City — she is looking forward to going home, where she will be in better a position to help.

Before the fellowship, Simchuk cofounded an online platform called Progress, intended to offer Ukrainian doctors access to training, best practices, and academic medical articles, all translated into their native language. She also hopes her connections made during her most recent fellowship in Boston will help her organize online seminars for doctors in her homeland.

Hospital administrators in Ukraine should study how hospitals work in the United States, Simchuk said. Medical education in their universities, she said, is not as good as it should be, and much of the hospital infrastructure is antiquated and cannot accommodate modern equipment. Plus, the need for trauma training is ever-present, she said, as Ukraine approaches the one-year mark since Russia launched its full-scale invasion.

Simchuk offers a sobering assessment of the war: more pain and bloodshed to come.

“They will never stop until they destroy Ukraine,” she said of the current Russian regime. “I don’t think this war will end in a couple months.”

Earlier this week, [the Associated Press reported](#) fighting remained largely deadlocked in eastern Ukraine. The warring sides have been sizing up their needs for renewed military pushes expected in coming weeks, with Ukrainian authorities now asking [for Western fighter jets](#) after US and German officials announced they’d send tanks.

Simchuk said that for Ukraine to truly know peace, Russia’s political regime will have to be uprooted.

“Who will come after Putin?” she said. “It could be the same person or worse. We will be in trouble.”

The war has already affected her life. Her parents and teenage brother moved to Warsaw last March, though they are talking about moving back to Ukraine. After a conflict erupted in eastern Ukraine in 2014, where Russia-backed separatists battled Ukrainian forces, she transferred out of Luhansk State Medical University because she did not want to live in occupied territories, adding that she had no interest in learning “under this banana republic.”

There was a time Simchuk did not consider the politics of linguistics, but that was years ago. She has since eschewed speaking Russian, the language she spoke at home as a youth, preferring instead to speak Ukrainian. That, in itself, is a political statement.

At the Harvard cafe, she appeared at ease and mostly content. She talked about the harsh realities of her country matter of factly. A painting she made that depicts the Carpathian Mountains in Ukraine was wrapped up and leaned against a wall in the coffee shop. She plans to give it to Melnitchouk, whom she considers to be a mentor.

In the middle of an hour’s worth of questions about the war and her work, she only showed hints of rage. Simchuk looks forward to helping people in Ukraine, but added

flatly that she can't picture herself being friends with any Russians — even those who oppose Putin and the war.

“We will never forgive them,” she said.

Material from the Associated Press was used in this report.

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