

'Catastrophically short of doctors': Virus surges in Ukraine

October 8 2020, by Mstyslav Chernov and Yuras Karmanau



A nurse checks the temperature of a patient with coronavirus in Stebnyk, western Ukraine, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020. As coronavirus cases increase, every bed in the hospital in this city in western Ukraine is in use and its chief doctor is watching the surge with alarm and anguish. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)

Coronavirus infections in Ukraine began surging in late summer, and the ripples are now hitting towns like Stebnyk in the western part of the country, where Dr. Natalia Stetsik is watching the rising number of patients with alarm and anguish.

"It's incredibly difficult. We are catastrophically short of doctors," says Stetsik, the chief doctor at the only hospital in the town of 20,000 people. "It's very hard for a doctor to even see all the patients."

The hospital is supposed to accommodate 100 patients, but it's already stretched to the limit, treating 106 patients with COVID-19.

Early in the pandemic, Ukraine's ailing health care system struggled with the outbreak, and authorities introduced a tight lockdown in March to prevent hospitals from getting overwhelmed.

The number of cases slowed during the summer but began to rise again quickly, prompting the government at the end of August to close Ukraine's borders for a month. Despite that, the number of positive tests in the country reached a new peak of 4,661 a day in the first weekend of October.

Overall, COVID-19 infections in the country have nearly doubled in the past month, topping 234,000.

"The number of patients is rising, and an increasing share of them are in grave condition," Stetsik told The Associated Press of the situation in Stebnyk, a quiet town in the Lviv region. "The virus is becoming more aggressive and more difficult to deal with."



Medical workers look at an X-ray of lungs at a hospital in Stryi, Ukraine, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020. Coronavirus infections in Ukraine began surging in late summer, and the ripples are hitting towns in the western part of the country. The government wants to avoid imposing a new lockdown, but officials acknowledge that the rising infections could make it necessary. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)

She said many of those doing poorly are in their 30s, adding that an increasing number of them need expensive medication.

"There is a similar situation across entire Ukraine," she said, adding that hospitals have run out of funds to provide drugs, forcing patients in some areas to buy their own.

The World Health Organization warns that the number of infections in

Ukraine could continue to grow and reach 7,000-9,000 a day.

The government wants to avoid imposing a new lockdown, but officials acknowledge that the rising number of infections could make it necessary. It has sought to introduce a more flexible approach to minimize the economic damage, dividing the country into various zones, depending on the pace of infections.

At a meeting Monday with officials in Kyiv, President Volodymyr Zelenskiy chastised them for failing to do enough to slow the spread and taking too long to provide necessary supplies.



Dr. Oleh Hornostayev speaks to a coronavirus patient at the hospital in Stryi, Ukraine, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020. Coronavirus infections in Ukraine began surging in late summer, and the ripples are hitting towns in the western part of

the country. The government wants to avoid imposing a new lockdown, but officials acknowledge that the rising infections could make it necessary. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)

"We spend weeks on doing things that must be done within days," he said.

Zelenskiy specifically urged them to move faster on ensuring that hospitals have enough supplementary oxygen, noting that only about 40% of beds for COVID-19 patients have access to it.

Ukraine's corruption-ridden economy has been drained by a six-year conflict with Russia-backed separatists in the eastern part of the country, and Zelenskiy's administration inherited health care reforms from his predecessor that slashed government subsidies, leaving [hospital workers](#) underpaid and poorly equipped.

Last month, Zelenskiy ordered the government to increase wages for [medical workers](#).

Official statistics show that 132 medical workers have died from the coronavirus, although the figure doesn't include those who tested negative but had symptoms typical for COVID-19.



Dr. Oleh Hornostayev walks through a corridor at the hospital in Stryi, Ukraine, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020. Coronavirus infections in Ukraine began surging in late summer, and the ripples are hitting towns in the western part of the country. The government wants to avoid imposing a new lockdown, but officials acknowledge that the rising infections could make it necessary. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)

One of them was Ivan Venzhynovych, a 51-year-old therapist from the western town of Pochaiv, who described the challenges of dealing with the outbreak in an interview with the AP in May.

Venzhynovych died last week of double pneumonia, which his colleagues believed was caused by the coronavirus, even though he tested negative for it.

"He certainly had COVID-19," said Venzhynovych's widow, Iryna, a doctor at the hospital where he worked. "There are many infections among medical workers, some of them confirmed and others not."

The government pays the equivalent to \$56,000 to families of medical workers who die from the coronavirus. But Venzhynovych's widow can't receive the payment because he tested negative.

As the number of infections soars, many lawmakers and top officials are testing positive, including former President Petro Poroshenko, who was hospitalized in serious condition with virus-induced pneumonia.



Dr. Oleh Hornostayev speaks to a coronavirus patient at a hospital intensive care unit in Stryi, Ukraine, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020. Coronavirus infections in Ukraine began surging in late summer, and the ripples are hitting towns in the

western part of the country. The government wants to avoid imposing a new lockdown, but officials acknowledge that the rising infections could make it necessary. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)

Medical professionals want the government to bring back a sweeping lockdown, pointing to the scarce resources for the [health care system](#).

"It's possible that Ukraine would need to return to a tight quarantine like in the spring. The number of patients is really big," said Dr. Andriy Gloshovski, a surgeon at the hospital in Stebnyk.

He blamed the new infections on public negligence.

"People are quite careless, and I feel sorry that they aren't impressed by numbers," he said.

Gloshovski said he had to switch to treating COVID-19 patients because of the personnel shortage.

"I had to change my specialty because my colleagues simply wouldn't be able to cope with it without me," he said.

Health Minister Maxim Stepanov acknowledged that the shortage of doctors and nurses is a big problem.

"We may increase the hospital capacity and improve oxygen supply, but we could just be simply short of doctors," he said. "Every system has its limit."



A patient with coronavirus breathes with an oxygen mask in a hospital intensive care unit in Stryi, Ukraine, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020. Coronavirus infections in Ukraine began surging in late summer, and the ripples are hitting towns in the western part of the country. The government wants to avoid imposing a new lockdown, but officials acknowledge that the rising infections could make it necessary. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)



A medical worker speaks to a coronavirus patient at a hospital in Stebnyk, Ukraine, on Tuesday, Sept. 29 2020. As coronavirus cases increase, every bed in the hospital in this city in western Ukraine is in use and its chief doctor is watching the surge with alarm and anguish. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)



A medic prepares a coronavirus patient for a lung X-ray at a hospital in Stryi, Ukraine, Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020. Coronavirus infections in Ukraine began surging in late summer, and the ripples are hitting towns in the western part of the country. The government wants to avoid imposing a new lockdown, but officials acknowledge that the rising infections could make it necessary. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)



A medical worker walks past a room as a coronavirus patient watches TV at a hospital in Stebnyk, Ukraine, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020. As coronavirus cases increase, every bed in the hospital in this city in western Ukraine is in use and its chief doctor is watching the surge with alarm and anguish. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)



A nurse, center, moves a bed with a coronavirus patient in a hospital intensive care unit in Stryi, western Ukraine, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020. Coronavirus infections in Ukraine began surging in late summer, and the ripples are hitting towns in the western part of the country. The government wants to avoid imposing a new lockdown, but officials acknowledge that the rising infections could make it necessary. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)



Medical workers help each other don protective suits at a hospital in Stebnyk, Ukraine, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020. As coronavirus cases increase, every bed in the hospital in this city in western Ukraine is in use and its chief doctor is watching the surge with alarm and anguish. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)



In this May 1, 2020, file photo, Dr. Ivan Venzhynovych speaks to The Associated Press after morning rounds with coronavirus patients at a hospital in Pochaiv, Ukraine. Venzhynovych later died of double pneumonia, which his colleagues believed was caused by the virus even though he tested negative for it. "He certainly had COVID-19," said Venzhynovych's widow, Iryna, a doctor at the hospital where he worked. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka, File)



Medical workers move the body of a patient who died from the coronavirus at a hospital in Stebnyk, Ukraine, on Wednesday, Sept. 30, 2020. As coronavirus cases increase, every bed in the hospital in this city in western Ukraine is in use and its chief doctor is watching the surge with alarm and anguish. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)



A medical worker checks on a coronavirus patient with a stethoscope, seen through a window at the hospital in the village of Toporivtsi, Ukraine, on Friday, Oct. 2, 2020. Coronavirus infections in Ukraine began surging in late summer, and the ripples are hitting towns in the western part of the country. The government wants to avoid imposing a new lockdown, but officials acknowledge that the rising infections could make it necessary. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)



A medical worker collects a sample for COVID-19 testing from a woman outside a hospital in the village of Toporivtsi, Ukraine, on Friday, Oct. 2, 2020. Coronavirus infections in Ukraine began surging in late summer, and the ripples are hitting towns in the western part of the country. The government wants to avoid imposing a new lockdown, but officials acknowledge that the rising infections could make it necessary. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)



A nurse transports a patient with COVID-19 in a wheelchair at a hospital in Stebnyk, Ukraine, on Wednesday, Sept. 30 2020. As coronavirus cases increase, every bed in the hospital in this city in western Ukraine is in use and its chief doctor is watching the surge with alarm and anguish. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)



Dr. Oleh Hornostayev closes an elevator door going into a red zone at the city hospital in Stryi, Ukraine, on Tuesday, Sept. 29 2020. Coronavirus infections in Ukraine began surging in late summer, and the ripples are hitting towns in the western part of the country. The government wants to avoid imposing a new lockdown, but officials acknowledge that the rising infections could make it necessary. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)

A tight lockdown would be a severe blow to the already weakened economy, Stepanov said, warning that authorities could be forced to do it anyway.

"If the situation takes a menacing turn, the Health Ministry would propose to return to tough quarantine measures," he said.

At the Stebnyk [hospital](#), some patients said they only realized the [coronavirus](#) threat after falling ill.

"I didn't believe in its existence until I became infected," said 43-year-old Natalia Bobyak. "When I got here I saw that people get sick en masse."

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