Letter from Croatia

Croatian Medical Journal AND THE WAR

The war in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina was the first in Europe after 45 years of peace. It resulted in enormous civilian suffering and destruction.1 In Croatia, the war started in April 1991, and truce was established in January 1992, though 24% of the country was still under occupation. Croatian forces liberated West Slavonia in May, and Glina and Knin areas in August 1995, while East Slavonia was reintegrated peacefully in January 1998.2 The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina started in November 1991 and was at its peak in April 1992. It lasted until the Dayton Peace Agreement of November 1995.3

Before the war, Croatia with a gross domestic product (GDP) of US$ 2600 per inhabitant, was the twenty-first economy in Europe. It had positive health indices, a sufficient number of physicians (21 per 10 000 population), a respectable tradition in preventive medicine and secondary and tertiary care of international value.4 While East Slavonia was reintegrated peacefully in January 1998, which was controlled by the Serbs.5 Physicians practising civilian medicine had to look after the many wounded soldiers and learn on the job.6 The Croatian Army Medical Corps started when a surgeon from Zagreb took the first-aid kit from his car and helped wounded soldiers passing by. Ten months later he was heading a service for more than 100 000 soldiers in the field.

The number of those displaced, wounded and killed was enormous. During the first year, there were some 10 000 deaths and more than 300 000 people (of Croatia’s 4.8 million) were displaced.7 The war in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina affected Croatia as it was the first and main shelter for the estimated 1.5 million refugees from its neighbours. At one time, the number of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina for which Croatia provided humanitarian support and health care reached one-quarter of our population.8

Another characteristic of the war in Croatia was the destruction of the health network.9 Many hospitals were directly and intentionally shelled, some even from close range. The damage to the buildings and equipment amounted to US$ 8 million.4,10 Supply services and the communication network of hospitals and ambulances9 were constantly under fire. It was not rare that patients or physicians were killed or wounded.9 In one such incident, more than 200 patients from the Vukovar Hospital were executed and buried in a mass grave after the fall of Vukovar town.11

The health system quickly adapted to the war and successfully prevented any epidemic or health crisis,12 in spite of the destruction of industrial, agricultural and other resources as well as blockade of traffic and energy sources.13

This quick adaptation of the Croatian health system could be attributed to several factors.14 Medicine was relatively independent from the communist regime of former Yugoslavia, which saved it from deterioration that some other sciences (history, law, economy) experienced. The health system had a professional structure and people were used to hard, disciplined work, acting under emergency situations and making rational decisions. (It is no surprise that there are many physicians in the political life of Croatia today and that three deputy prime ministers are physicians.) Being relatively spared from political oppression, medical professionals continually adopted international standards of work. Another important factor was the abundant humanitarian medical aid which came to Croatia from various sources—it was accepted, sorted, distributed and used without any major losses.

A new medical journal in English, the Croatian Medical Journal, had been planned before the war and its launch was scheduled for the spring of 1992. The aim was to make Croatian scientists aware of the need for a further improvement in our standards of research and publishing in the biomedical sciences. It was also intended to push them out of a false sense of security which resulted from publishing in domestic journals and set high standards for publishing in biomedical research.14 The war interrupted our preparations and changed our plans completely. The journal’s editorial board gathered physicians who were teachers at Croatian medical schools and who participated in, initiated or supported many activities related to war and medical education.

Information on the medical aspects of war

As we were preparing the journal’s first issue, the suddenness and the intensity of the war and destruction forced us to change our plans. We realized that what was most important was to gather and present medical aspects related to war in the journal. The first such collection was published in November 1991 as a supplement to the unpublished first issue (which came out on time in March 1992). The supplement provided a description of civilian casualties in the first few months of the war and a number of mass killings of civilians; statistical analysis of the displacement of people from war-affected areas, and a description of the new Croatian external surgical fixator for bone surgery. It also carried a letter from the Zagreb Jewish Community appealing for help to the Republic of Croatia and its citizens.

The end of 1991 saw the fall of Vukovar, the city which suffered a complete siege by the Yugoslav Federal Army for several months.11,15 The Yugoslav Federal Army and paramilitary forces killed more than 200 patients from the Vukovar Hospital, and some 1500 other people. We gathered the testimonies of our colleagues from the hospital who arrived in Zagreb as refugees. These appeared in a separate book in December 1991.15

After the first regular issue of the journal in March 1992, we published a more extensive Second War Supplement (235 pages v. 76 pages of the first supplement). It was an extensively documented presentation of the medical aspects of war, psychological analysis of war trauma, children casualties, civilian deaths and massacres, health status of released prisoners of war and refugees, destruction of medical institutions, organization of the Croatian Medical Corps into four echelons, and a number of specialty reports. Later, the Croatian Medical Journal was the first to publish a preliminary report on the medical consequences of ethnic rapes.16

In publications in other journals, we also presented how education at the Croatian medical schools continued during war,17 how medical students organized assistance to war victims,18 and
a number of reports on patient follow up and the organization of war hospitals. After cessation of the war, we continued to publish reports on the effects of war in the region and that of post-communist transition in healthcare.  

Humanitarian activities

A comparative assessment of the intensity of suffering (killed or wounded or displaced/population/time of conflict), puts Croatia high on the list of recent wars in the world. More people were killed per population and per time of conflict in Afghanistan and Cambodia. The conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina surpasses all other recent conflicts in the number of killed and displaced in a given time. Such suffering called for action, even from non-combat, non-practising physicians. The editorial board of the Croatian Medical Journal, several other physicians, and individuals of other professions initiated and organized one of the few large and successful humanitarian convoys to the surrounded enclaves in central Bosnia-Herzegovina. The convoy started on the Human Rights’ Day of 1993, and, after many perils, brought food, medications and medical staff to an improvised hospital in the village of Nova Bila where a handful of medical professionals were taking care of 70,000 people completely trapped for months. Help was given to everyone, regardless of nationality and religion. The war not only brought forth tragic incidents, but also innumerable examples of heroic, humane and peaceful deeds. These were integrated and classified in a number of proposals for humanitarian and peace-promoting actions that can be applied anywhere in the world during military conflicts.

The J.J. Strossmayer University at Osijek (East Croatia) suffered substantial damages during the war. Data were gathered on the need for its revival and published in a booklet which was distributed throughout the world to collect donations and other forms of assistance.

World Association of Croatian Physicians

Emigration from Croatia was very high before World War II, and especially during the communist regime (1945–90). According to estimates, half the Croatians live outside of Croatia. The same holds true for Croatian physicians. The World Association of Croatian Physicians (WACP) was formed during 1991 in response to a need to establish cooperation between Croatian physicians all over the world. The Croatian Medical Journal became the Association’s official journal and helped support its activities to secure regular help in terms of material and staff for Croatian hospitals. After the war, the Association helped in the reorganization, reform, modernization, and privatization of the Croatian health system.

Education

When the war started, there was no textbook on military medicine in the Croatian language. When experts decided to use the NATO handbook on military medicine, we along with many other physicians translated and published it in a month. The book proved to be of enormous help in the organization of an effective health system to provide care for soldiers and civilians at the battlefield.

Our work with the Croatian Medical Journal, especially its war supplements, made us aware of Croatian physicians’ unwillingness and fear of getting their articles published in international medical journals. Fifty years of egalitarian financing of science in former Yugoslavia was responsible for their lack of skills required for publishing in international journals. Therefore, the Croatian Medical Journal introduced an author-friendly process of manuscript pre-review. We would work with the author on the presentation of his/her data until it reached the level required for a fair peer-review. The same approach was adopted to help physicians writing for international journals. This resulted in more than 80 articles on medical aspects of the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina being published in mainstream journals.

The European Association of Science Editors also helped organize a course in scientific writing for young physicians which was conducted by Ms E. Heseltine in Zagreb in 1997. The participants came from medical centres all over Croatia and went back with new knowledge to share with their colleagues.

After five years of this activity, we focused our attention on the population with maximum potential to revive Croatian medical science—the medical students. In 1996, an obligatory course on basics of scientific research and writing was introduced in the curriculum of the Zagreb School of Medicine. Second year students are taught the logic behind scientific research, basics of experimental design and statistics, information retrieval system in medicine, and principles of scientific writing. The students seemed to like the course and often come for advice and support in their own research.

The Croatian Medical Journal is in its sixth year of publication and since 1998 has been indexed in the Index Medicus/MEDLINE database. This will certainly increase its visibility. We also hope that the journal will publish more reports from India, such as a thorough review of infectious diseases in South-East Asia, co-authored by a Croatian and an Indian physician. India has been important to us. As one of our authors, a great humanist and human rights activist, Dr Slobodan Lang, said in one of his analyses of the role of the Red Cross in the Balkan war:

Gandhi so memorably defined my freedom and experience of Croatian struggle for freedom: ‘I would like to see my India (Croatia) free and strong so that she may offer herself as a willing and pure sacrifice for the betterment of the world.’

REFERENCES


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