



Medicine and War

Support for Ukraine

Wyoming doctors find a way to help kids in a country at war

BY RACHEL GIRT



PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. KENT KLEPPINGER Each flag placed in Independence Square in Kyiv signifies a person who died in the war with Russia.

Kent Kleppinger, MD, a pediatrician based in Laramie, is on a mission to support doctors in Ukraine who are struggling amidst the devastating war crisis.

This story isn't about Dr. Kleppinger's personal contributions. "It's about healthcare and kids," he insisted.

Known as "Klep" to his patients, Dr. Kleppinger tends to wear Hawaiian shirts instead of scrubs. He is not a celebrity, a mountain climber or an adventure seeker. He is a gardener with, until the recent addition of another doctor, a solo rural practice.

In February 2022, Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine, resulting in millions of refugees seeking safety in neighboring countries. The haunting images of mothers desperately protecting their children from harm weighed heavily on Dr. Kleppinger's mind.

Something inside him snapped. He made the decision to help, regardless of how crazy it sounded. He doesn't speak Ukrainian and has no family ties to the area.

According to UNICEF, the war in Ukraine has left an estimated 27.3 million people—including 7.1 million children—in need of humanitarian assistance.

With the commencement of the war, a third of Ukraine's healthcare workforce, including doctors, nurses, and support staff, left the country. The exodus has severely impacted their healthcare system, which will require significant time and effort to rebuild, he said.

"They are hurting and want to catch up badly," he said.

In 2022, Dr. Kleppinger embarked on his first journey to provide medical care in a war zone. His trip was not without its challenges, such as the language barrier, finding a place to

volunteer and making travel arrangements.

As a solo practitioner at the time, Dr. Kleppinger couldn't afford to take six months off to join organizations like Doctors Without Borders. However, he was determined to dedicate two weeks to helping kids in need.

Initially, Dr. Kleppinger considered collaborating with a relief agency in Poland for a week. However, he quickly dismissed this idea when he discovered that he could only volunteer for a limited number of hours each day.

Helping more children

Taking a chance, he googled the Ukraine Ministry of Health and called at 12:30 am MST—Ukraine is about nine hours ahead of Wyoming. He called to offer hands-on pediatric assistance and was put through to the Deputy Minister of Health, who spoke English.

The U.S. government advised citizens not to travel to Ukraine, so Dr. Kleppinger was worried about visas or other paperwork. The deputy minister reassured him that nothing was needed.

The deputy minister told Dr. Kleppinger, "Just come."

The children's hospital system in Kyiv, a city of three million people, is composed of nine children's hospitals. Dr. Kleppinger called five of them before finally connecting with someone who spoke English and received the same invitation, "Just come."

In September 2022, he flew to Lublin, Poland, the closest large city to Ukraine. He rented a car, planning to drive the almost 400 miles to Kyiv. When he reached the border, guards turned him back because rental cars are prohibited in a war zone. He drove back to Lublin and took the train to Kyiv.

Dr. Kleppinger worked in a pediatric clinic alongside staff



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doctors, seeing well visits and acute care visits of children from birth to age 16.

Throughout his time in Kyiv, Dr. Kleppinger treated approximately 200 children. Due to safety concerns related to missile attacks, he was asked not to take any photographs of the patients, hospitals, or surrounding areas.

While he has no photos of them, the children left a mark on his heart.

"They are wonderful, nice, kind people, and their parents are very loving and caring for their kids," Dr. Kleppinger said. "Some of the most beautiful children I have ever seen."

Although his volunteer efforts were much appreciated, Dr. Kleppinger discovered a great need for education, protocols, and training through conversations with residents in the OB/GYN department and neonatologists. Additionally, there was a need for portable, high-flow nasal cannulas to transport infants to safety during air raids.

Upon returning to the U.S., Dr. Kleppinger helped raise \$8,000 in three months in support of a refugee resettlement organization in Lublin, Poland and the neonatal ICU group.

He also sought ways to provide educational support and protocols for his Ukrainian colleagues. Initially, he reached out to the National Academy of Pediatrics, but limitations in their bylaws prevented them from helping.

This led Dr. Kleppinger to contact Andrew Rose, MD, then the president of the Wyoming Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. The Wyoming chapter expressed its commitment to establishing connections between Ukrainian and Wyoming pediatricians.

Helping was an easy decision to make, Dr. Rose explained. "Those pediatricians are doing their best in such a horrible situation. We wanted to help in any way we could and show support," he added.

Dr. Kleppinger explained that support could even be as simple as a Ukrainian pediatrician reaching out to a Wyoming doctor, "I've got a patient, and I'm thinking that I want to use this antibiotic; what do you guys use?"

"We are hopeful to have the Wyoming network up by the end of this year," Dr. Kleppinger said.

Dr. Kleppinger also contacted the Children's Hospital Colorado, which offers advanced training to develop, strengthen, and sustain knowledge and expertise in the pediatric medical field. The hospital's programs are affiliated with the University of Colorado Denver School of Medicine.

Children's Hospital Colorado gave Ukrainian pediatricians access to a website with a video library that contains the past four years of videotaped lectures.

This past May, Dr. Kleppinger returned to Ukraine for two

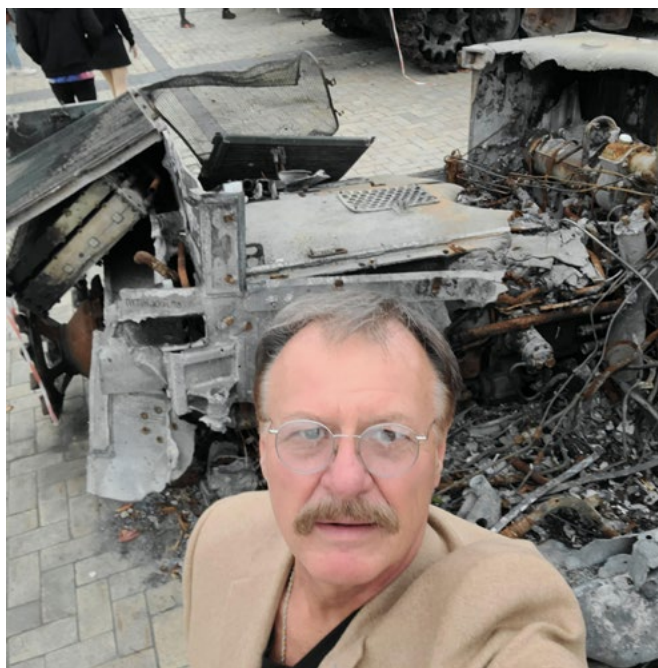


PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. KENT KLEPPINGER Dr. Kent Kleppinger takes a photo in front of a destroyed Russian armored vehicle in St. Michael's Square in Kyiv.

weeks to see kids, lecture, and discuss education opportunities for physicians.

He met with Oleg Valenshuvoskiy, MD, PhD, head of the Kyiv District's OB/GYN, and spent two days discussing details to set up a medical exchange program.

Under the exchange program, Ukrainian faculty from the children's hospitals could visit the Children's Hospital Colorado for intensive specialized two to four week training sessions. The Ukrainian doctors would live with sponsor physician families to learn more about American culture. The faculty then would return to the Ukraine to teach the other residents.

"We're also talking about putting together a delegation of pediatricians to go to Kyiv and teach residents, do lectures, and see patients," Dr. Kleppinger said. "We would be trying to cram about a semester of education into about a two-week period."

The exchange program idea is in its preliminary stages, Dr. Kleppinger said, noting that the Children's Hospital seems very eager to do this.

Dr. Kleppinger wants his story to serve as an example to others on how to offer assistance. He plans to continue to encourage efforts to help accelerate the rebuilding of the Ukrainian medical system.

"When you keep hearing the same phrase, 'Just come,' you cannot unhear it. When you see the war in Ukraine, you cannot unsee it," he explained. 