

A Medical Student's Volunteering Experience During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

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The Experience

War is always a devastating situation for all the parties involved; no matter which one wins at the end, there is always something to lose, such as soldiers, money, and the nation's safety.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we could not attend our university in Ankara, Turkey, between March 2020 and January 2021. Like many other universities in the world, classes in my university went fully online. I was confronted with the pandemic's difficulties, like the uncertainty of the period and the quality of distance learning.^{1,2} I was in my home country (Azerbaijan, located in Caucasus region, in the coasts of Caspian Sea) and was attending online classes and having my routine study day. On the 27th of September 2020, we heard a war started between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the western side of Azerbaijan called the Nagorno-Karabakh region, a mountainous and forested region located in the south Caucasus.³ It was a tremendous war with more than a hundred thousand military personnel attending on both sides.

The news from the war was not good for both sides; there were too many dead and injured soldiers each day. Hundreds of wounded soldiers were brought to nearby hospitals, and there was a need for extra medical personnel. I applied to several authorities as a volunteer to help the personnel for medical care to wounded soldiers; in the end, I was able to go to Salyan Central Hospital in Salyan (150km away from the war zone). In the meantime, while the media announced the news regarding the end of the conflict, the number of injured soldiers was increasing exponentially each day.

Since the hospital where I was volunteering was not at the war zone, the soldiers were sent there from the field hospitals after the first aid was applied. I was assigned with a team of doctors to perform tasks given by the hospital administration. I was helping with the admission of soldiers to hospital rooms, primary surgical treatment like suturing, bandage change, and physical examination. I saw different types of injured soldiers; they mostly came with extremity wounds, trunk wounds, and concussions due to explosions. I was mainly affected by the soldiers who had concussions. They were in a strange condition; they could barely talk, comprehend, or walk. Most of them even did not know where they were and what happened exactly. I had an opportunity to talk with some of the soldiers, and their thoughts were touching; most of them wanted to go back to war and help their

companions despite their injuries. While watching their medical conditions, I felt sorrow and despair as many of them would live with the psychological and physical effects of the war.

It was an exhausting period as COVID-19 was complicating the situation in hospitals, and no one knew when the war would end. The number of cases was increasing on a daily basis. So many of the doctors were in a fight with COVID, and some of them were infected and could not work. As a result, the help of medical students was necessary for hospitals. Moreover, the patient overload in hospitals increased the risk of infection spread.

Despite the fear of the pandemic, we were working day and night with our best. Ambulances were transporting the soldiers to nearby hospitals from the war zone, doctors were doing their best to treat the injured soldiers, hospital personnel was making every effort to help, and medical students like me were doing our best in every possible situation within the hospitals. I have experienced that in a war situation, the body's resistance increases against exhaustion.

The war took nearly two months and ended on the 10th of November 2020; it cost more than 6500 lives in total from both sides.^{4,5} Nevertheless, I had an exceptional experience during that time. No matter how the war was an unfavorable event during the pandemic, I learned how to work under time and emotional pressure at the very early stages of my career as a physician. Moreover, working in a team to deliver the best care was another significant experience I have gained. Therefore, I can advise medical students that they should feel ready to help in emergency situations like a war in case of need, as your help may be more important than you thought.

In conclusion, the war period was surrounded by a great deal of emotions. Victorious or not, wounded and dead soldiers are a dark side of the war, which obviously influenced both nations. As many of the doctors were in a fight with COVID-19, in this doctor absence and patient overload, the helps of medical students were crucial during the war period. That experience of mine shows that medical students can also take a significant role in healthcare during a war. Volunteering in a hospital during a war was a strange experience and feeling that will last a lifetime on my memory.

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