It takes a brave heart to be a nurse in a war-torn country

Nurses and health workers are being targeted for attack on unprecedented levels. We need to take action now to stop this.

Despite a UN Security Council resolution in May condemning such attacks, there were 43 in July alone. According to a World Health Organization report, 256 attacks were directed at medical services in 19 countries last year, killing 434 people, including health workers and patients. This is a violation of international law protecting healthcare facilities.

In August, the International Council of Nurses and the World Medical Association issued a joint press release condemning these atrocities and supporting a UN resolution calling for the cessation of hostilities and respect for ceasefires that are long enough to provide aid.

Last month, CNN reported the story of Malaika, a head nurse in Aleppo's children's hospital who held a baby as he died after a direct hit to the hospital. Later, off duty, she was hit by shrapnel which required an operation to remove it, but she was still back at work the next day.

Nurses put patients before themselves on a daily basis – it takes a brave heart to nurse, not just a big one. Action and accountability are urgently required.

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ASK THE EXPERT

Who should have the MenACWY vaccine?

Groups of young people are being advised to have the new meningitis vaccine to stop the rise of strain W

Meningitis strain W cases are on the rise in England. In 2009, there were 22 cases, increasing to 117 by 2014. The number is expected to rise again this year unless more vaccinations take place.

The risk of contracting the disease is increased through communal living and close contact. One of the high-risk groups are first-year university students as they will be mixing with large groups of new people, some of whom may carry the meningococcal bacteria. This group is being requested to have the meningococcal ACWY (MenACWY) vaccination before they start university or soon after. MenACWY protects against four different causes of meningitis and septicaemia, including strain W.

**Herd immunity**

Another group being targeted is teenagers, aged 14 and above, to ensure they are vaccinated before they leave school. They will be offered the vaccine as part of routine programmes, alongside the 3-in-1 teenage booster and as a replacement for the meningitis C vaccine.

As well as ensuring they have some protection against the illness, vaccination is recommended for these groups because greater take-up will help achieve herd immunity.

Herd immunity occurs when the vaccination of a large portion of a population provides some form of protection for people who have not developed immunity. The more people who are vaccinated mean fewer people will be susceptible and can spread the disease.

The number of people needed to have been vaccinated to achieve herd immunity varies from disease to disease, but a higher level of take-up will certainly help to achieve this and protect people who have not been vaccinated due to age or illness.

Matt Griffiths
is visiting professor of prescribing and medicines management at Birmingham City University

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