

# UKRAINE PAEDIATRIC FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM



# CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF THE UKRAINIAN PAEDIATRIC FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

## An interview with Dr. Myroslava Romach

THIS YEAR marks 10 years of the Ukrainian Paediatric Fellowship Program (UPFP). Someone who has been absolutely instrumental in the development and success of this program is Dr. Myroslava Romach. She has been there since the beginning and has now made 14 trips to Ukraine with UPFP. Who better to talk to about the evolution of this program than Dr. Romach. Here's what she had to say about UPFP over the last 10 years.

### 1. How have you seen the program evolve?

UPFP started in 2012 and was promoted by me through the Children of Chernobyl Canadian Fund to SickKids. I convinced Dr. Jim Rutka, who is of Ukrainian heritage, to join the initiative. UPFP activity has grown significantly since that time. We started with only Dr. Rutka and me travelling to Ukraine to operate on neurosurgical cases and to promote maternal-child mental health. It then expanded to other interrelated disciplines for the treatment of brain disorders in children-neurology, neonatology, anaesthesiology, and some general surgery. SickKids clinicians began travelling to hospitals in different cities such as Lviv, Kyiv, Odesa, and Dnipro to act as teachers and mentors. We have now made 14 trips to Ukraine and have had almost 60 Ukrainian physicians come as observers to SickKids. Now, with the ongoing war in Ukraine, we are pivoting to more urgent areas of need. This includes burns treatment, and physical and mental health rehabilitation of children who have experienced trauma in the war.



Dr. Myroslava Romach

### 2. What has been your most rewarding moment participating in this program?

This is a difficult question to answer as there have been many treasured moments working with the program. The patients we have met have been so moving in their gratitude. However, two experiences do stand out in my mind. One is an occasion that happened in the early years of the program. We met two sisters – one was an 18-year-old, and the younger sister was 13 and had a brain tumour. Sadly, their parents had died, and the older sister was trying to find treatment for her younger sibling. However, she could not afford the associated costs. Dr. Rutka conducted the operation successfully with our Ukrainian colleague, Taras Mykytyn, and the relief the two girls demonstrated was heart-rending. The eldest gifted us small icons of guardian angels as a thank you. The second moment is a more personal one. Ten years ago, I started lecturing on the importance of maternal mental health on the healthy neurodevelopment of infants. This was a topic Ukrainian physicians had not considered to be important and were not terribly interested in. Now, this is an issue being routinely addressed in many perinatal care centers in Ukraine, which I think is a great advancement in maternal-child health.





## Recent Updates

- Mission teaching visit to Lviv, first since 2019
- UPFP will support training for a state-of-the-art neurophysiology laboratory at St. Nicholas Paediatric Hospital that is being funded by the Temerty Foundation
- UPFP will support training for a burn treatment unit at St. Nicholas Paediatric Hospital that the Temerty Foundation is partially funding
- Sent medications to Saint Nicholas Pediatric Hospital
- Sent a neurosurgical ultrasound machine as well as a urodynamic system to Saint Nicholas Pediatric Hospital's partner adult hospital and completed a significant software upgrade to the neuronavigational system donated last year
- Hosted the ambassador of Ukraine at SickKids in August
- Five Ukrainian observers at SickKids in 2023



### 3. How does philanthropy fuel this program?

This program is entirely dependent on philanthropic support, primarily from the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada. The seed money to start up the endowment fund for UPFP in 2013 came from a donation by a Ukrainian Canadian farmer living in Saskatchewan.

### 4. What are your future plans for the program?

Hopefully to have the program continue and be successful as we start to pass on the management to a younger generation of physicians. We had planned to expand our work to more children's hospitals in eastern Ukraine so that we could be working with colleagues across the country, but the war has put a hold on these plans. For the near future, our focus will be on the treatment of mental health issues in children and the treatment of burn injuries. I think future directions will very much be driven by the state of affairs as the war continues and the situation when the war ends. The rebuilding of the Ukrainian healthcare system after the war will require great effort and will make our work and its support even more critical.

# PERSPECTIVES ON NEONATOLOGY IN WESTERN UKRAINE

A Wartime Report by Diane Wilson, Nurse Practitioner and Dr. Chris Tomlinson

Ukraine has been ravaged by a protracted war since the Russian invasion, over 500 days ago. This has caused widespread devastation and placed an immense strain on a healthcare system that was still rebuilding. We present our perspective on the state of neonatology following a recent medical mission led by the UPFP to Saint Nicholas Pediatric Hospital in Lviv. The UPFP was established in 2013 with the goal of building healthcare capacity in a post-Soviet system. The program began with a focus on neurosurgery and psychiatry but has since grown to include both neurology and neonatology and, in previous years, general surgery and neuro-oncology. This was the first visit of the team since the COVID-19 global pandemic and the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine. During the visit, the team spent time in their respective specialties providing education, advice, rounding with the teams, and consulting on patients.

At Saint Nicholas Pediatric Hospital, located in Lviv, the neonatology department has continued to progress in the complex care provided to NICU patients. In spite of the challenges faced by neonatologists because of the war, there were a variety of high-acuity patients receiving advanced treatments and surgical interventions. Some examples include a patient undergoing therapeutic hypothermia treatment for moderate hypoxic ischemic encephalopathy, another requiring neurosurgical intervention for post-haemorrhagic ventricular dilatation, preterm twin babies requiring ventilation, a baby with antenatally diagnosed myelomeningocele for neurosurgical closure, and a patient with Trisomy 21 and imperforate anus, who required urgent surgery for a stoma. This is all happening in an environment where air raid sirens are now

part of the daily reality in the city and can be heard within the hospital.

In Ukraine, there was an exodus of skilled neonatologists at the start of the war, leaving the remaining medical personnel with the burden of heavy workloads under strenuous conditions. In the NICU, the neonatologists are faced with a complicated infection-control situation due to multi-resistant organisms and a limited repertoire of medications coupled with difficulties in obtaining timely and accurate laboratory test results. Infection control is of the highest priority for the team.

During our visit we witnessed healthcare providers confronted with the emotional toll of decision-making around prioritizing resources and developing alternative solutions in the face of limited resources. The psychological impact on both parents and neonatal healthcare providers cannot be underestimated. The trauma and stress experienced during a war can lead to heightened levels of anxiety and depression among parents, hindering their ability to actively participate in their child's care and impeding the bonding process.

This wartime mission was an incredible opportunity to witness first-hand the resilience and unwavering strength of the Ukrainian medical community. Their dedication and determination were evident as they provide excellent care to the neonates of Lviv as well as many internally displaced Ukrainians under the most strenuous circumstances with limited resources.

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## REFLECTIONS ON THE JUNE 2023 SICKKIDS-LED MEDICAL MISSION TO UKRAINE



*Diane Wilson, NP, and Dr. Chris Tomlinson with Dr. Victor Bobyk*

“The team said they were better able to understand the hardships of working in a country affected by war, for whom supplies, and daily medical operations have been gravely impacted. Air raid sirens are now a part of the daily reality in the city and can be heard within the hospital. The team said it was an incredible opportunity to witness the resilience and unwavering strength of Ukrainian people. The dedication and determination of all members of the medical team was evident as they provide excellent paediatric care to the children of Lviv as well as many internally displaced Ukrainians.”

- Diane Wilson and Dr. Chris Tomlinson





# THANK YOU

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:**

SickKids Foundation  
525 University Avenue, 8th Floor  
Toronto, Ontario M5G 2L3

**PHONE** 416.813.6166  
**[sickkidsfoundation.com](http://sickkidsfoundation.com)**