

Improving Maternal and Child Health in Russia's Lake Baikal Region

Situated in the autonomous Russian republic of Buryatia, Lake Baikal is the largest fresh water lake in the world and was once called "the pearl of the world." Increasingly, however, this massive lake has become renowned less for its abundance of clear, blue water, than for its pollution by hazardous chemicals, which are dumped into it from numerous shoreline pulp and paper mills. According to health experts, that pollution has played a major role in the escalation of many health problems, particularly among expectant mothers.

In Buryatia's capital of Ulan Ude, only 10 percent of pregnant women who sought care at City Maternity Hospital be in good health, says Dr. Dorothy V. Skye, an ob/gyn at Sacred Heart-Saint Mary's Hospitals, Inc. in Rhinelander, Wisconsin. Skye started coordinating medical efforts with local Buryat health officials in 1994, four years prior to the establishment of AIHA's USAID-supported Buryatia/Rhinelander partnership in January 1998.

"Ultimately, these complications lead to negative health problems for the newborn," Skye explains, noting that approximately 680 of every 1,000 newborns at City Maternity Hospital experienced problems such as anemia, low birth weight, hypoglycemia, and respiratory distress.



The partnership between the Ministry of Health of Buryatia and Sacred Heart-Saint Mary's Hospitals, Inc. worked to improve survival rates for expectant mothers and newborns in Buryatia hospitals, says Skye, who led her hospital's efforts to collaborate with healthcare providers in Buryatia. During her initial trips to Buryatia, she began identifying gaps in the provision of maternal and newborn care and setting priorities for improving the health status of women, infants, and children. One of her first tasks, she recalls, was to demonstrate a Caesarean section at the Ulan Ude City Maternity Hospital using equipment donated from the United States.

Through the partnership, Skye and her colleagues in Buryatia were introduced to AIHA's neonatal resuscitation training model and then adapted it for use in the region. Skye collaborated with colleagues from Wisconsin-area hospitals to demonstrate Western neonatal resuscitation techniques to local healthcare personnel during professional exchanges to Buryatia.

Lack of medical equipment at maternity hospitals in Buryatia presented a huge obstacle at first, Skye says. "The equipment was just not there at all, and when you don't have the equipment and supplies, you really can't train caregivers," she points out, explaining that she carried upwards of 250 pounds of luggage, chock-full of excess donated medical supplies from her Wisconsin home to hospitals in Buryatia on three previous solo trips to the republic.

"It was a start," she said, referencing the improvements made in updating Buryat maternity wards. "In the intermediate and long term, our collaborative efforts did have a very positive impact on the health of the people of Buryatia."