

Healthy Heart Program Gives Georgian Journalist a New Lease on Life

As a journalist, writer, and former editor-in-chief of a regional newspaper, 69-year-old Alexander Didebashvili had always led a hectic—some would even say stressful—life. Juggling work and family was never a problem, though, because he loved both his writing and his wife Nona and their two children. “It wasn’t until I turned 60 that I noticed some heart palpitations along with some other symptoms such as dizziness or shortness of breath,” Alexander says. “Sometimes, my heart would beat so fast I was afraid it would explode out of my chest.”

Around that time, Alexander also remembers that he often felt exhausted—even by some of the activities he used to do without breaking a sweat. “I was worried by these changes, but they never lasted very long, so I attributed them to the fact that I was getting older and slowing down a bit,” he explains. Alexander admits that he put off visiting the doctor for several years after he first noticed the telltale signs of hypertension, which is called the “silent killer” because symptoms—if they occur at all—are so easy to ignore.

“Finally, I grew tired of never feeling quite well and decided to visit my physician. The facility had been remodeled in cooperation with a group of Americans from Milwaukee and was now called the Mtskheta Family Medicine Center. The doctor told me that they had initiated many new services and programs thanks to the training they received through this partnership,” Alexander recounts. “She did some tests and told me that I had high blood pressure. She said that this condition could lead to heart attack, stroke, or even death if I didn’t get it under control immediately.”

Then his doctor told him about the Center’s new “Healthy Heart” program, which could provide him with the care and information he would need to change his lifestyle habits, reduce stress, and get his blood pressure under control. “I agreed to participate and met with Nino Revazishvili, the nurse who runs the program,” Alexander says, noting, “She took my blood pressure again then talked to me at length about the steps I needed to take in order to



PHOTO: SUZANNE E. GIBBINIAN

Now that his blood pressure is under control, Alexander can return his attention to his latest project—an anthology of children’s poems and fables.

effectively manage my hypertension. We talked about diet, exercise, and other lifestyle changes that could make a real difference for me and she told me that we would work together to ensure my success.”

Some of the changes—adding some daily exercise and cutting down on saturated fat, for example—fit easily into his lifestyle. “I made a pact with myself to do some sort of physical activity every morning. I even got my wife to join in, which makes things more enjoyable,” Alexander says with a smile. “My wife is also helping me eat more healthfully. We both thought that animal fat was not good for us, but before I started the ‘Healthy Heart’ program we didn’t understand its role in causing high cholesterol and hypertension. Now, she cooks with vegetable oil and we try to eat only lean meat. In addition, I’ve cut down on the amount I drink, which is not necessarily the easiest thing to do in Georgia given our culture and traditions,” he continues, his smile deepening.

Once thought to be a problem affecting wealthy industrialized nations, cardiovascular disease has proven that it recognizes no socioeconomic or geographical borders. The stresses of some 13 years of political and economic transition coupled with unhealthy lifestyle choices has resulted in a virtual epidemic of largely preventable ailments such as diabetes, high cholesterol, and hypertension in Georgia and other countries of the former Soviet Union. This is the story of one man who, after discovering he was at risk for heart attack or stroke because of his high blood pressure, found the support he needed to manage his condition at the Mtskheta Family Medicine Center, which was established by AIHA’s Mtskheta-Mtianeti/Milwaukee partnership. The story of the nurse who helped him is on the other side.

Even so, the heart-healthy habits Alexander has learned from Nino have taken root in his whole family and are spreading to some of his friends, too. “Of course my wife adopted many of my lifestyle changes because she wants to be sure I succeed and stay healthy, but others also noticed the difference in my outlook and energy level and began asking me questions about what I was doing—first my children, then some of my friends and colleagues,” he professes. “I feel so much better and my mind seems much clearer as well. I feel that I have more motivation and creativity, so I’ve gotten back to writing children’s books. I’ve had six of them published in the past, but seemed to lose interest when I wasn’t taking care of myself.”

According to Alexander, effectively managing his blood pressure and recovering his interest in writing are two major benefits of his participation in the Center’s “Healthy Heart” program, “But, seeing my family and close friends reap the rewards of better health thanks to my experience might be the greatest benefit of all.”

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Mtskheta Nurse Helps Patients Manage Hypertension

Nino Revazishvili is a great teacher. Her warm personality makes it easy for her to connect with people. They listen to her and most of them take her advice to heart. That's a good thing. After all, the information Revazishvili shares with her patients at the Mtskheta Family Medicine Center is about how they can stave off cardiovascular disease by controlling their blood pressure and adopting healthier lifestyle choices.

"Hypertension is a huge problem in Mtskheta and other districts in this region of Georgia," Revazishvili admits, noting that roughly six out of every 10 adult patients who come to the Center have high blood pressure. "Life is stressful and many people don't take care of themselves. Perhaps they smoke or eat fatty foods ... maybe they drink too much or don't get enough physical activity," she points out, explaining that community assessment surveys conducted soon after the partnership was formed painted a clear picture of just how pervasive the problem was.

Through the partnership, Revazishvili and other practitioners from Mtskheta traveled to Milwaukee where they saw effective primary care programs in action—including some for managing hypertension. "I participated in three exchanges and each one introduced new concepts and ideas that could be applied to our situation in Georgia," she says. "Much of what I learned helped me improve my clinical knowledge and skills, but I also learned how to foster behavioral change through patient education."

What was even more interesting for Revazishvili was seeing nurses in America take such an active role in direct patient care. "As soon as I returned from my first exchange, I told my colleagues how different nursing is in the United States. American nurses have a much higher level of education and training, therefore they have more responsibilities. When I told everyone, they all wanted to be part of the effort to move us in that direction," she recalls. "So, as a group, we all committed to being open to new ideas and learning all we could from our partners."

For her part, Revazishvili focused on learning all she could about chronic diseases



PHOTO: SUZANNE E. GRINNAN

Thanks to the training she received through Mtskheta's partnership with Milwaukee, primary care nurse Nino Revazishvili now plays an important role in helping patients manage hypertension.

and how to design programs that would both help patients better understand their condition and give them the tools they need to manage it effectively. "Because hypertension is such a huge concern in our region, my colleagues and I came up with the idea for a 'Healthy Heart' program that would focus on frequent patient visits to closely monitor each participant's blood pressure and any medication they were taking. At the same time, we would educate them about the things they should be doing to alleviate stress and other factors that contribute to hypertension," Revazishvili explains.

The partners worked together to design a patient education curriculum and materials, while continuing to provide the Georgian practitioners with many opportunities to increase their knowledge about hypertension and hone their clinical skills through exchanges and workshops. "One of the most important things I learned was how to interact more effectively with patients ... to provide them with information they can use and advice they will listen to. It is critical for people to really understand how a disease

In the old Soviet paradigm of health-care, nurses had very limited responsibilities for direct patient care. As countries in this region work to create a more efficient and cost-effective way of delivering health-related services, however, primary care has taken center stage allowing nurses to play an increasingly important role in community health. At the Mtskheta Family Medicine Center, which was established in 2001 by AIHA's Mtskheta-Mtianeti/Milwaukee partnership, nurses have taken the lead in creating patient education programs that enable those living with chronic diseases to better manage their conditions. This is the story of a nurse who helped develop the Center's "Healthy Heart" program; the story of one of her patients is on the other side.

affects the system and how their actions can either help or hurt them," Revazishvili acknowledges, noting that nurses are particularly well-suited to patient education. "Many people think doctors are so far above them. We seem more approachable and down-to-earth, so patients are more comfortable opening up and talking about their habits and fears."

So far, more than half of the 600 patients in the "Healthy Heart" program have proved that they are willing to change their habits if it means they will live a longer, healthier life. "About 53 percent of the participants have brought their blood pressure within normal range, which is a great improvement over the 29 percent of patients who were controlling their condition before we started the program," Revazishvili concludes, smiling proudly. "The knowledge I gained through our partnership has enabled me to take on more professional responsibilities and—when I share that knowledge with my patients—I enable them to take greater responsibility for themselves."

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