

Working to Achieve “A Healthy Start in Life” for the Children of Kosovo

Kosovo is home to 2 million people, half of whom are under the age of 25. More than two decades of political unrest culminating in war in 1998-1999 has left Kosovo’s healthcare infrastructure in severe crisis. Currently, the country’s infant and maternal mortality rates are among the highest in Europe and — with some 350,000 women in their reproductive years — the continuing poor health status of women and children represents a critical barrier to this emerging democracy’s socio-economic development.

A health symposium conducted at Camp Bondsteel, the US army base in eastern Kosovo, on September 16 represented an important step toward improving the health of Kosovar women and children, according to Dr. Mary Packer, a British obstetrician and gynecologist who has been working in Kosovo for nearly a decade. As Chief of Party for the American International Health Alliance (AIHA) in Pristina, Packer directs the “Partnership to Improve the Health of Women and Children in Kosovo,” a project supported by the American people through the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

“The symposium’s theme was ‘A Healthy Start in Life,’ which reflects one of the highest priorities for Kosovo,” Packer says, noting that the current healthcare system is characterized by a lack of coordination among care providers, whether public or private, at all levels of care. “Other key challenges include a lack of necessary equipment and supplies and significant clinical training and education gaps in women’s and children’s health provision,” she explains.

Co-sponsored by KFOR, USAID, and AIHA, the event brought together nearly 200 Kosovar and Serbian physicians, midwives, and allied professionals working in healthcare facilities throughout the country. Experts from Europe and the United States presented on a wide range of topics, including pre-natal care, newborn assessment and primary care, and the role midwives play during pregnancy, birth, and beyond. The Multi-National Task Force East (MNTF-E) hosted the event at Camp Bondsteel’s theater.



Event organizers from KFOR and AIHA, clinical experts, and selected participants take time to pose for a photo during the one-day “Healthy Start in Life” symposium held September 16, 2009 at Camp Bondsteel.



Conference participants await the start of the symposium. Nearly 200 midwives, physicians, and other health system stakeholders from across Kosovo attended the one-day event.

“The infant and maternal mortality rates [here] are among the highest in Europe. Those are important indicators of health capabilities, and we’d like to see them improve,” says Colonel Sharon Navratil, Commander of Task Force Med Falcon. “Our goal was to promote health information and to improve prenatal and perinatal care throughout the region.”

Technical and logistical planning for the symposium required a great deal of collaboration, according to Lieutenant Colonel Scott Simmons, who works in MNTF-E Civil Military Operations, assigned to Task Force Med Falcon.



Lieutenant Colonel Scott Simmons and AIHA’s Chief of Party in Kosovo, Dr. Mary Packer.

“This was a team effort; a lot of planning and resources went into this,” Simmons says. “With an event like this, the little issues can become big issues. We planned well, and everybody executed well.”

Navratil explains that KFOR troops were also instrumental in bringing Kosovo Serb participants to the event. “We coordinated with Irish KFOR in Brezovica to encourage Serbs from Strpce to attend,” she says, stressing the importance of involving all segments of the population in efforts to improve maternal and child health in Kosovo.

Dr. Sasha Cvetkovic, Director Gynecology and Obstetrics in Gracanica, and a Serbian, attended the conference with one of his colleagues.

“KFOR is making good efforts to bring us all together to discuss these important issues,” Cvetkovic said at the symposium. “Networking with other healthcare providers in our field is a big benefit.”

Calling the event a positive experience for both KFOR and Kosovo, Colonel Navratil says, “It helps our mission by building capacity for medical care in Kosovo. The focus here is health, and the success of this symposium improves the chances of Kosovo becoming successful. Every step like this will help them get on the right track.”

Packer agrees, concluding, “I’m thrilled with the turnout — it exceeded expectations. It was an excellent event.”

Background on the Partnership to Improve the Health of Women and Children in Kosovo

With support from the American people through USAID/Kosovo, AIHA launched its three-year partnership project to improve the health of women and children in Kosovo in 2009. The partnership links US health and civic organizations with counterpart institutions throughout Kosovo to strengthen maternal and child healthcare capacity at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

US partners contributing their knowledge and expertise include the Providence-based Women and Infants Hospital of Rhode Island and National Perinatal Information Center, California-based ValleyCare Health Systems and Livermore Rotary Club, and the American Medical Resources Foundation and Assist International.

Key objectives of the project are building the prerequisite institutional and human resource capacity needed to:

- improve quality, scope, and frequency of prenatal care;
- improve quality of primary level care for infants and children;
- improve perinatal and post-partum care for women and newborns;
- improve quality of care for high-risk mothers and infants, as well as emergency cases; and
- raise awareness of the importance of prenatal care through targeted patient education and community outreach.

To date, working closely with the Ministry of Health and local administrations, AIHA and its partners have completed a comprehensive assessment of tertiary, main secondary, and selected primary maternal and child health institutions spanning Kosovo. They have also conducted a maternal and child health roundtable and case management discussion with key local and international stakeholders, supported in-country activities related to the International Day of the Midwife, participated in the US Embassy's Balkan Breast Cancer Initiative activities, initiated colposcopy services at the University Clinical Center of Kosovo in Pristina, and secured the donation of two ambulances, which will soon be equipped for neonatal transport and given to the Center. Other activities include participation in the National Maternal and Child Health Conference held in Pristina in May 2009, conducting a consensus meeting on the regionalization of perinatal care, and conducting trainings on neonatal resuscitation and obstetric emergency care at four regional hospitals.

Project activities over the coming months will focus on practitioner education, training, and networking; implementing a system of regionalization of neonatal care using the ambulances to transfer the most at-risk newborns to the tertiary care hospital; public education and outreach campaigns and targeted media messaging; and assessment, revision, and/or development of obstetric and neonatal protocols.

For more information about AIHA, please visit www.aiha.com.

For more information about USAID projects in Kosovo, please visit www.usaid.gov/kosovo/.