

A New Vision for Women's Health Emerges in Iowa

Women's health has expanded its scope dramatically in recent years to include more than just health risks related to childbearing. Treating adolescent and post-reproductive health needs, psychosocial problems and chronic conditions like anemia and cardiovascular disease is now viewed as essential to providing quality care for women. And while this comprehensive women's health model has been accepted more readily in the US than in other nations, it has guided the many successes that NIS partnerships are achieving in improving care for women.

Redefining women's health, emphasizing health education and disease prevention services, and involving the community outside the hospital setting were themes that emerged in the many women's health sessions held in Des Moines. NIS and US women's care providers spent three days exchanging information on how far they have come, how their patients are benefitting, and how they can expand on their work through the 14 women's wellness centers slated to open in NIS partner hospitals over the next year.

"No other specialty in the health care sciences challenges every aspect of the medical, sociological and political sciences as does women's health," said Lauren Arnold, PhD, RN, assistant professor, University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, and senior manager for health care consulting, Ernst and Young, LLP, summing up the importance of women's health for partner institutions.

"It is important because women, in many cases, are the central figures in family life. Women's health often reflects the health of individual families and, therefore, society. Women have been underserved from a health care perspective for many decades, and it is now time to change that," Arnold said.

At a special forum, health ministry representatives from across the NIS presented brief reports on the challenges their nations face in women's health (see page 9). In Russia, Savior's Hospital for Peace and Charity in Moscow, partners with Magee-Women's Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has set the pace for providing comprehensive care to women in a supportive environment. "More than 300 public [women's health] programs have been formed in recent years," said Nikolai Vaganov, MD, deputy minister of health, Russian Federation, pointing to Savior's as a "model" for women's health in his country. "We are looking forward to the continued support of the public."

While women's health achievements in the NIS were hailed in Des Moines, presenters stressed that there still is much to be done in the US as well. Christopher Atchison, MPA, director, Iowa Department of Public Health, acknowledged in a plenary session that his state had only recently given women's health the attention it deserves, holding its first women's health conference three years ago. He said substance abuse, cancer, cardiovascular disease, maternal and child health and access to care are major concerns for Iowa's women.

"There is a lot to focus on in women's health; I suggest that we have perhaps been inattentive to the population and its needs, and we need to refocus our efforts so that those needs can be met," he said.

A "Philosophy of Womancare"

Irma Goertzen, president and chief executive officer at Pittsburgh's Magee-Women's Hospital, gave the conference's keynote speech on women's health, focusing on the "philosophy of womancare" that Magee-Women's has developed over the years. Women's focus groups convened by the hospital determined six basic concepts that should be considered in developing a women's health care model: 1) respect for the dignity of the individual, 2)

opportunity for adequate, accessible information, 3) empowerment of the individual, 4) integrated, comprehensive care, 5) high quality care and support, and 6) cost effectiveness.

"Our model starts with the premise that health care begins with the woman, not the provider," Goertzen said. Magee-Women's has opened several "Womancare Centers" in Pittsburgh based on the six concepts, which "can be adapted to women's health regardless of the country or part of the United States that you might come from."

Providing a place where women can go to seek treatment for all their health needs--from ultrasound to mammograms to nutrition counseling--is an important goal for Goertzen and her colleagues. "In the United States, women usually have to go to one place to get their physical, another place to get their mammogram, maybe another place to get their blood drawn, and maybe another place if they need to see a specialist," she said. "In Moscow, this might be evident in the system of polyclinics that might not have any direct relationship to the birth houses. In going from one caregiver to another, there is always concern about communication of information and what is being or could be missed."

The model also matches women's health care needs and services to the age of the patient, from birth to old age. As women's life expectancy increases, it is becoming increasingly important to expand services to adolescent and peri- and post-menopausal women, Goertzen said.

High-quality treatment, disease prevention and education in a cost-effective setting, form the foundation for Magee-Women's philosophy, which has been adapted successfully by Savior's Hospital and will serve as a framework for other NIS partner women's wellness centers. "We are trying to make the process of seeking and obtaining care less intimidating and more comfortable. Prevention is the key. The promotion of integrated care with good educational programs and computerized record-keeping... should eliminate wasteful and expensive duplication of services," Goertzen concluded.

Redefining Women's Health

In a series of conference breakout sessions, US and NIS health care professionals discussed goals and outcomes of various women's health initiatives being carried out in partner hospitals and their surrounding communities. Preventing and treating breast and cervical cancer was the subject of two sessions. Susan Sieber, PhD, deputy director of the division of cancer epidemiology and genetics, US National Cancer Institute (NCI), gave an overview of NCI's breast cancer research programs, which have expanded markedly in recent years along with the institute's funding for breast cancer...from \$81 million in fiscal year 1990 to almost \$337 million in fiscal year 1996.

Sieber said NCI's breast cancer strategy includes: identifying the risk factors and molecular markers for breast cancer; developing and implementing clinical trials for drugs like tamoxifen, which interferes with the action of estrogen in cancer cell growth; developing clinical approaches to a cure, such as gene therapy and vaccines; and improving access to screening and treatment for all women.

Karine Sarkissian, MD, administrative director of the women's center at Erebuni Medical Center in Yerevan, Armenia, described the changes her center has made since 1992 in detecting early stage cervical cancer. With the help of partners from the University of California at Los Angeles Medical Center, Erebuni implemented new procedures for taking pap smears, coloring the smears and evaluating the ensuing laboratory results, replacing 1965 Armenian Ministry of Health guidelines with the newer NCI guidelines for pap smear evaluation.

"During the first year, we did pilot tests... we took pap smears according to two methods, the old and new, " Sarkissian said. "The results were that patients with [early stage] cervical cancer were identified 25 percent more frequently with the new methods. "

She added that Erebuni now holds on-site training seminars in cervical and breast cancer detection for physicians, and intends to replicate these methods across the country.

Experts also addressed the impact of nutrition and lifestyle factors on women's health in Des Moines. Shiriki Kumanyika, PhD, head of the Department of Human Nutrition and Dietetics, University of Illinois at Chicago, stressed women's unique nutritional needs, which vary over the lifespan. "Nutritional needs are different for women. They need to get extra nutrients while eating less food... the nutrient density has to be better, " she said, noting that the recommended daily caloric intake is much higher for men.

She enumerated several important research questions that are being asked about the effects of nutrition on a woman's health: For example, does a low fat diet protect women from breast cancer and heart disease? Does calcium prevent osteoporosis? Does weight change predict illness? Does an unusually low cholesterol level precede certain chronic diseases?

Socio-economic conditions can also have a direct impact on women's health, presenters noted. Tamara Iashvili, MD, a gynecologist at the First State Clinic in Tbilisi, Georgia, said women's health in her country is being adversely affected by massive population shifts resulting from the conflict in Abkhazia, a region in northwestern Georgia. Among the female refugees, who are often homeless, tuberculosis, scabies, diphtheria and sexually transmitted diseases are prevalent.

In keeping with a conference theme of women's health throughout the lifespan, the health risks of adolescent girls--sexually transmitted diseases, eating disorders and substance abuse, to name a few--were discussed in one session. In the United States, a nationwide network of 625 public school-based health clinics serve the adolescent population, and provide services like immunization and pregnancy and HIV testing. But these centers are only reaching a few teenagers and cannot address the biggest problems in adolescent health, said Ken Cheyne, MD, a specialist in adolescent medicine at Blank Children's Hospital in Des Moines.

"One of the biggest issues facing us in the US is teenage pregnancy... only about a third of the [school-based] centers will prescribe birth control pills, fit diaphragms or hand out condoms. Right now it is a really hot political issue, and we're not dealing with it in the most effective ways. "

Many conference participants stressed the need to reach out and involve the community in women's health improvement and education. For example, Karina Pokhis, MD, director of the Center for Advanced Treatment, Medical Center in the Name of Sokolov, St. Petersburg, Russia, said her hospital is working to raise women's awareness of what constitutes good nutrition: "We believe that women's health is not just a medical problem... therefore, we must resort to involving other professionals, like those who work in agriculture and mass media. "

Raising public awareness can help to curb violence affecting women as well, two US sexual assault and domestic violence counselors told participants. An Iowa program called the "Clothesline Project " shown in the conference display area, displayed multicolored sweatshirts bearing women's names and slogans like "Broken Bones, Broken Home, Broken Family " to represent individual women in Iowa who had been victims of rape, battery and murder.

Diane Holmay, RN, director of the Center for Women's Health at Franciscan Skemp Health Care in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, said the Dubna, Russia-LaCrosse partnership hopes to provide support and a "safe setting " for victims of domestic violence as part of the women's wellness center that will open in Dubna. "It is important for [NIS health providers] to see that this can

be done on a shoestring budget. Not a lot of resources are needed if you make key people aware and partner with other people in the community. "

Additional sessions offered NIS partners a first-time opportunity to discuss common problems in high-risk pregnancy, as well as patterns in contraceptive use, which differ between the US and NIS. Experts noted that women in the NIS commonly use intrauterine devices, whereas many US women prefer oral contraceptives.

Moving Forward

In a post-conference session hosted by Jill June, president of Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa, US and NIS members of AIHA's women's health initiative met to coordinate their plans for establishing 14 women's wellness centers, the first of which is scheduled to open in March in Almaty, Kazakstan.

Initiative members learned about Planned Parenthood's private, voluntary model for providing reproductive health services to US women, and received a host of planning materials, including floor plans, contraceptive samples, budgetary and staffing guidelines, medical history forms and patient education materials.

Partner hospitals participating in the women's health initiative will receive funding to cover partnership exchanges, supplies and equipment, and contraceptives. In Ukraine, several partners will launch a separate breast cancer prevention initiative this winter alongside the broader women's health initiative.

NIS members said the conference sessions, from rural health models to breast cancer prevention to telemedicine in practice, provided a solid grounding for the breadth of care the women's wellness centers hope to provide to patients.

"Practically all sessions on women's health were of great interest, " said Valeriy Ryzhkov, MD, chief of obstetrics and gynecology at the Stavropol Krai Department of Health in Russia. "Promotion of a healthy way of life for women is a very important issue, and we sure want to advocate it in Stavropol Krai. "