

Health Ministries Forum Tackles Issues in Women's Health

While the Ministry of Health in Kyrgyzstan tries to cope with an annual 2.2 percent increase in births and a high maternal mortality rate, thousands of miles away the Belarussian Ministry of Health worries about the negative effects of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident in a nation where 60 percent of pregnancies are classified as "problem" pregnancies.

Representatives of ten NIS Ministries of Health spoke about these and other women's health issues in Des Moines, and, while regional differences emerged, their presentations revealed a common commitment to finding new ways to improve the health profile of women.

In Uzbekistan, for example, inadequate health education, poor nutritional status and short birth-spacing periods are complicating health factors for women, Farkhad Fuzailov, MD, head of human resources and education in the Uzbek Ministry of Health, said. Fuzailov's nation is "redesigning maternal services by integrating birth houses and prenatal clinics in order to provide comprehensive care " to women. He added, "We are actively enlisting the support of other medical professionals, like pediatricians " to create a system of patient education and primary care for women.

Alamkhon Akhmedov, PhD, Minister of Public Health of Tajikistan, said his ministry is developing a "national strategy for women to provide care for life, " to include the health concerns of women beyond their reproductive years. He mentioned anemia, tuberculosis, pelvic inflammatory disease, and breast and cervical cancer as common diseases among Tajik women.

Research efforts aimed at studying the epidemiology of maternal and infant mortality, and medical education reform in Tajikistan are also indicative of new directions in women's health. Beginning this year, Akhmedov noted, "To become an obstetrician-gynecologist, one is required to go to the National Medical University for nine years, including five years in the general medical school, and four years in the graduate school specializing as an obstetrician-gynecologist. " An independent obstetrician-gynecologists association is being formed in Tajikistan this year as well.

In the western NIS nation of Belarus, women's health has suffered since the Chernobyl accident. One indication of this is that only one-third of the births occurring between 1985 and 1995 were considered to be "normal; " the country's health sector views this problem as a "national priority " in women's health right now. Pavel Mikhalevich, MD, chief of the main medical department in the Belarussian Ministry of Health, said the ministry is joining forces with the Ministry of Education to provide educational material to women on the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS as one step toward better prenatal health.

High-risk pregnancies are a problem for Moldovan women as well, as is a high abortion rate and late diagnosis of cancer. By expanding the role of the family physician, and improving patient education and family planning programs, the health ministry hopes to reverse these trends.

"Moldova is a small country, but our problems are very big in the area of women's health, " said Valentina Melnik, MD, head of the Maternal and Child Health Care Department, Moldovan Ministry of Health. "We pay great attention to women's health because we look forward to the health of the future generation."