

Slovak Communities Identify Elder Care as Priority

By Julia Ross

As the Slovak Republic proceeds cautiously on its path toward democratization, the nation's senior citizens and their families are struggling to cope without a safety net of state-run and financed social and health care services. The residents of Martin and Banska Bystrica--neighboring cities nestled in central Slovakia's foothills--are no exception. A dearth of retirement homes and nursing homes in the region has put increasing pressure on families who are expected to step in where the state left off.

When the cities' community health partnership with The MetroHealth System in Cleveland, Ohio began last year, local Slovak leaders identified elder care as an area in desperate need of both financial and human resources.

"After the privatization of state-owned primary and specialized health care institutions, the geriatric ambulatory clinic practically disappeared," said Marta Kulichova, MD, PhD, a hospice specialist and partnership team leader in Martin. "This clinic had provided special care for these patients for the last ten years, and nothing is currently replacing it."

Cathy Ceccio, MSN, director of rehabilitation nursing at The MetroHealth System, traveled to both Slovak cities last fall to help assess partners' needs. "What they are trying to do is develop a continuum of long-term care," she said. "Though they have been, traditionally, a family-focused society, often there is not enough room to care for an elderly family member, or the wives or daughters, who are the traditional caregivers, must work. In addition to that, there really is very little home care available."

But there are signs in both communities that citizens are mobilizing to improve geriatric care. For example, a new nursing care and residential facility in Banska Bystrica reflects the city's commitment to finding creative ways to mend gaps in the elder care network. Converted from an old schoolhouse, the facility combines beds for traditional nursing care, units for assisted living and a loft for seniors who can live independently. To bring in extra revenue, the building will also house a drug store and a store selling home care aids.

"[The Slovaks] are trying to use their bed space very flexibly, and they are trying to address the needs of a population where resources are constrained," Ceccio added. "They are really trying to use 'transitional care' as a means to decrease acute hospital units."

According to Eva Vnencakova, MD, chair of the Banska Bystrica City Council's Committee for Health and Social Matters, local leaders are doing their best to accommodate seniors eager for expanded health care choices. "Within the current network, we have established a geriatrics department and a unit for long-term care--which is 30 beds--at [the local] Roosevelt Hospital," she said. "On the community level, in 1998 we will operate a nursing care unit with 16 beds in the local pensione for retired people."

Partners are also interested in developing hospice programs to serve seniors with terminal illnesses. In Martin, Kulichova has spearheaded efforts to provide palliative care to the elderly for the past three years. "This is provided by home visits through two nursing centers of the chronic pain ambulatory clinic, and by volunteers, medical school students, and full-time nurses from the hospital," she explained. "This we consider to be a mid-step before establishing a hospice."

Health care professionals in Martin and Banska Bystrica--who completed a one-week study tour of hospice, home care and long-term care facilities in Cleveland last December--say they hope their American colleagues can provide assistance with creating and evaluating surveys to assess the needs of the local elderly population, as well as expertise in hospice management.

Slovak Catholic charities are currently planning to establish a hospice in Banska Bystrica, and Kulichova is lobbying for governmental support for Martin's first hospice.

"It is important to continue developing information we have received [from partners in Cleveland] and applying it to conditions in our cities," said Pavol Bielik, a home care manager and a city deputy in Banska Bystrica, "... and to perhaps provide financial support for home care in the private sector."