

Dutch Program Helps General Practitioners Gain Ground In Ukraine

By Barbara Ruben

Until recently, many residents of Odessa complaining of gastrointestinal problems, ear infections or sore throats were referred directly to a specialist or the hospital for treatment. But a collection of programs funded by the Dutch government and aimed at creating more general practitioners and community nurses may help usher in a new era for medical care in Ukraine.

Over the last three years, the Hogeschool in Amsterdam, which offers higher education in the sciences, has spearheaded an effort to help transform Ukraine's specialist-driven health care system to one in which primary care plays a paramount role. The projects have helped create medical school programs for general practitioners and nurses as well as several pilot primary care centers in Odessa and rural areas. A similar project was recently launched in Belarus.

According to Hugo Busser, the Hogeschool's NIS and CEE project manager, the project draws on the Netherlands's reliance on a primary care-based medical system.

"Ninety-two percent of all health complaints are seen by family doctors. Only 8 percent are referred to specialists in hospitals," he said. "It is an efficient and effective system, one that we think can greatly improve health of the residents of Ukraine and Belarus."

Creation of a primary care-based health system is one of the goals of Matra, a \$45 million fund set up by the Dutch government to assist in "societal transformation" in the NIS and CEE.

The Matra-funded program helped reshape Odessa State Medical University's Department of Primary Care and Family Medicine, which the university began in 1993. Postgraduate education began in the spring of 1997, and the first group of 16 general practitioners and 18 community nurses started practice last year.

Five pilot primary health centers, three in Odessa and two in rural Razdelnaya Oblast, have been opened under the program. General practitioners and community nurses first underwent training in both Odessa and the Netherlands.

"Already we've shown that the referral rate to specialists is going down," Busser said. "General practitioners are becoming more independent in making their own diagnoses."

Over the last five years, there has been a reduction of 16,000 hospital beds in the Odessa Oblast, two-thirds of which are in rural areas, along with a reduction by 3,000 of physicians.

But the centers have also pointed out marked differences in training and standards for primary health care between urban and rural areas. To help standardize primary care practice and education, the Hogeschool project helped create the Odessa Regional General Practitioner Association in 1997 and a national association last year. The associations also help disseminate information on primary care and are working to develop national policy.

A center for primary care research and expertise was started in 1997. The center is collecting primary health care data from across Ukraine. It also provides research for a separate Hogeschool project, funded by Tacis-Lien, a European Union fund targeted for development in the NIS and CEE, that works in part to promote primary care in the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS in Ukraine.

Last year the Hogeschool, along with the Netherlands Institute of Primary Health Care, began a similar project in Belarus. This project will establish a network of model primary care practices in 12 to 50 rural and semi-rural settings in Minsk Oblast. It will also train doctors from the model practices and develop curricula for family medicine and home care nursing.

In both Ukraine and Belarus, the Hogeschool is working with city health administrations and ministries of health to develop national policies promoting and standardizing primary care.

"What we are doing is building up not only small islands of new family practice doctors and centers, but eventually broader and broader use of primary care," Busser said.