

Toward A Healthier Workplace in Romania

By Julia Ross

For the men and women who toil inside Romania's factories, the workplace can pose a veritable obstacle course of health hazards. Examples of this abound in Cluj, a heavily industrialized city in the country's Transylvania region, where one commonly can find workers in foundries or ceramics plants exposed to toxic solvents or airborne irritants, but who are not wearing gloves, goggles or face masks.

Working toward the goal of improving health and safety conditions on the factory floor, the Cluj-Philadelphia, Pennsylvania partnership in the last year has begun assessing worksites in Romania and the US, and exchanging information on developing guidelines for occupational and environmental hazard control. As part of this exchange, four industrial hygienists from Cluj traveled to Philadelphia's Thomas Jefferson University (TJU) in February, where they attended lectures by TJU, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and City of Philadelphia faculty on subjects such as heavy metals toxicity, occupational risk assessment and management, and air monitoring.

The group also participated in a vendor fair--where four occupational health and environmental safety products companies donated synthetic latex gloves (unavailable in Romania), safety goggles, respirator facepieces and particulate filters--and visited Philadelphia's Southwest Water Pollution Control Plant and Biosolids Recycling Center.

A highlight of the trip was a two-day EPA Environmental Response Training Program--a condensed version of EPA's standard five-day course, specially designed for the Romanians. During the course, the group received an overview of US regulations governing environmental hazards, and took part in a field exercise that requires participants to identify and measure hazardous material and utilize proper protective equipment during a simulated hazardous accident.

Adriana Jurj, a chemist and toxicology specialist with the Sanitary Police (the division of public hygiene within the Ministry of Health) in Cluj, said it was useful for her to learn about the "threshold limit values" used in the US to determine when the concentration of hazardous substances exceeds safe levels. She said common industrial health problems in her country include silicosis, a respiratory illness caused by exposure to silica dust, and eye injuries occurring when safety goggles are not worn.

For Aurel Mocan, a chemist with Cluj's Medical Center for Health Services and Management, being exposed to practical methods of air sampling in the US was important. Mocan analyzes gases and pesticides for 10 districts in Transylvania using only one 25-year-old instrument. "We need to be able to determine hazardous exposure for the entire length of workers' shifts--six or eight hours. But right now we can only do momentary sampling of five or ten minutes," he said, noting that obtaining adequate equipment for industrial hygienists is a priority.

The challenges the Cluj partners face in improving health and safety standards in the workplace are daunting, according to Lance Simpson, PhD, MD, professor of medicine, biochemistry and molecular pharmacology, and director of the Jefferson Clinical Center in Occupational and Environmental Medicine at TJU.

In Romania's unstable and inflationary economic environment, funding for personal protective gear at Cluj's industrial worksites is not a top priority for the government or for factory managers, though they understand the need for it, he said. When such gear is available, it is usually inappropriate for the task at hand or uncomfortable to wear (i.e. respirators or hard hats that are the wrong size for workers).

Compounding the problem in difficult economic times is a national hazard pay law that increases the salaries of workers when they are exposed to hazardous substances on the job. "On the one hand, people want a safe place to work, but, on the other hand, the workers are absolutely dependent on their hazard pay. It's a terrible predicament," he said.

As Cluj's industries slowly become privatized, however, there is hope among both US and Romanian partners that investing in workers' health will become more acceptable, and that a hazard pay system based on potential for risk instead of actual exposure to risk can be adopted. Already, Jurj noted, "There are managers in some private factories who would rather pay more for protective equipment than pay for higher wages."

"It will be a very difficult transition for people to go through," Simpson said. "We simply have to do what we can to increase sensitivity to workplace issues."