

Health Management Education: Creating a Critical Mass for Change in the Czech Republic

By Roman Prymula

The successful transformation of the Czech health care system cannot be accomplished through the efforts of talented medical professionals alone. As market forces are introduced through new payment systems, professional managers with a strong knowledge of management science, practical skills and a thorough understanding of economics are necessary to maintain the health of the system as a whole.

After years of internal and external efforts to focus attention on the importance of management education in the health care system, it has been grudgingly acknowledged that managers are necessary at the highest levels of the health care system. But rarely is it recognized that this need extends beyond that. The Czech health care system suffers from a lack of well-educated middle-level managers and the few educational programs available (with the notable exception of the Prague School of Public Health) are targeted at high-level management and usually offered only in the form of continuing education short courses.

To help fill this gap, the goal of the two health management education partnerships between US and Czech educational institutions has been to develop full-time career-entry study programs for middle managers in the health care system. With the help of our very supportive, willing, and creative US colleagues, a new bachelor's degree program at South Bohemia University in Jindrichuv Hradec opened on schedule this spring, followed by the opening of a new bachelor's degree program at the Faculty of Management and Information Technology in Hradec Kralove. More than seventy Czech health professionals are now studying management in these new programs. The Czech Republic-US partnerships will continue to refine curricula and teaching methods through September 1997 when they are scheduled to graduate.

The successes of these health management education partnerships are not ones that will end when US government funding ends later this year, however. Through informal exchanges and the use of the Internet and videoconferencing, we anticipate furthering the partnerships with our US counterparts for years to come.

Perhaps even more significant for the long-term growth of health management education in the Czech Republic, though, are the ties that the partnership program created within the Czech Republic itself. By encouraging the sharing of faculty and resources among the partnership institutions, our US partners brought a sense of purpose and a common language to what was previously an uncoordinated effort. The partnerships created a nucleus of dedicated health management educators and professionals to jointly address the issues facing that profession.

Building on the momentum generated by the partnership program, nine Czech partner institutions jointly submitted a grant proposal to the Czech Ministry of Health to increase the exchange of expertise and information among Czech educational institutions in the area of health management education, and to develop uniform standards for health management education in the Czech Republic and establish curriculum requirements. Billed as a follow-up project to the health management education program, the grant proposal was submitted to the Internal Grant Agency of the Ministry and, despite very strong competition, was successfully approved at a level of 2 million Czech Crowns, or about \$70,000.

The Learning Resource Centers established through the partnership program will provide the basic infrastructure for networking between the several Czech educational institutions. Access to Internet-based information databases, pedagogical staff development through an intensive exchange program, and teleconferences and various interactive educational programs by

satellite will be the other key forces in strengthening the new network. The project will involve those educational institutions that are in a position to produce well-balanced health management experts, both for middle-level and top-level positions.

Although the grant represents only the beginning of a long process, the support of the Ministry of Health and the mutual cooperation of all partners--realized through the success of the health management education partnerships--are the key building blocks of our future success. The best proof of this new reality can be found in the words of Dr. Petr Struk, director of education with the Czech Ministry of Health: "We understand very well the key role of health managers' education for the future stability and development of the health care system in the Czech Republic. The network of such educational facilities will be the best way to ensure this aim."

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