

Slovaks Study US Drug Problems and Solutions

By Julia Ross

The appearance of illicit drugs in Slovakia has been a recent development with which the country is scrambling to cope. Up until about four years ago, alcohol was virtually the only drug, legal or illegal, available in the Eastern European nation. But newly opened borders following the political changes of 1989 and low prices have combined to create a fertile market for illegal substances, and heroin has now taken the lead as the drug of choice for many young Slovaks.

In order to curb this troubling trend, the Slovak government adopted a three-year "national program to combat drugs" last year, which included appointing Zuzana Pónisov6, JuDr, as the general secretary of the Board of Ministries for Drug Dependencies and Drug Control for the Slovak Republic - the equivalent of the US "drug czar".

Pónisov6 was part of a three-person delegation, along with Martin Haber, MD, administrator for Drug Dependencies with the Slovak Ministry of Health, and Lubomír Okruhlica, MD, PhD, a psychiatrist at the Center for Treatment of Drug Addictions in Bratislava, Slovakia, and visiting Hubert H. Humphrey fellow at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, that participated in an AIHA study tour of US drug treatment and prevention programs in June. Under the auspices of the healthy communities partnership between Petržalka, Slovakia and Kansas City, Missouri, the delegation spent two weeks in the cities of Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Wilmington, Delaware; and Washington, DC, talking with officials at a number of community-based organizations, federal agencies and universities.

Slovakia's new drug-fighting program takes a three-pronged approach: drug use prevention, treatment of addicts, and control of drug production and trafficking. But the delegation was most interested in learning about treatments, especially those directed at heroin use.

According to Haber, the Slovak Ministry of Health has registered a startling increase in the number of new heroin addicts - from 50 addicts in 1990 to 1,000 in 1995. "Since 1989, the situation has changed dramatically. Immediately, heroin has come to Slovakia and has been marketed aggressively," he said. "It is especially troubling that mostly youngsters are affected by it - 90 percent of our [illicit] drug users are between the ages of 15 and 24."

The delegation began its trip by meeting with several faculty members at Johns Hopkins University, who gave them an overview of the history of drug use in the US. The group then toured a methadone treatment clinic in Baltimore, which was of particular interest because health officials in Slovakia are currently considering how to introduce a national methadone treatment program. Methadone is the synthetic narcotic that is used to treat withdrawal symptoms of opiate addiction. This type of treatment has been used in the US since the 1960's, despite some controversy over the fact that the treatment substitutes one drug for another. Haber said methadone has also met with some resistance in Slovakia because the heroin-using population is so young, and "It is unpopular to put a 15-year-old on methadone maintenance."

An innovative prison drug treatment program in Delaware gave the group another perspective on US treatment approaches. James Inciardi, PhD, director of the Center on Drug and Alcohol Studies at the University of Delaware, provided a tour of the KEY/CREST program he established in the state correctional system. The program requires drug offenders to live in a "therapeutic community" in prison for one year, where they learn to identify behavioral patterns that can lead to drug abuse. In the program's second phase, offenders spend six months in a work-release facility, while a third phase requires six months' participation in counseling and group therapy during parole. KEY/CREST has shown remarkable results, with 76 percent of its graduates remaining drug-free 18 months after release from prison, Inciardi said.

Thom Browne, demand reduction coordinator for the US Department of State Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, discussed with the group the US Information Agency-sponsored drug treatment professional training courses currently being conducted in Central and

Eastern Europe (CEE), which have been well-received in Slovakia, according to Haber. And John Gregich, senior policy analyst at the US Office of National Drug Control Policy, described the various duties of his agency, which determines drug-related priorities for the federal budget and serves as the coordinating office for all federal drug activities.

The delegation continued its agenda with meetings at the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) and the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) (both divisions of the US Department of Health and Human Services), and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) (an institute within the US National Institutes of Health).

CSAT staff described their TARGET cities program, which provides grants to large cities to facilitate cooperation among all drug treatment providers in the health, corrections and vocational communities, while Michael Dana, PhD, director of intergovernmental and external affairs at CSAP, told the delegation that successful drug prevention initiatives begin with proper parenting and strong community support. "What makes a difference is when all of the major components that comprise a community - parents, schools, churches, the health sector - all work together in harmony to achieve some goal," he said.

Because the Slovak government wants to establish a science-based drug research institute similar to NIDA, the group was especially interested in discussing different methods and applications of epidemiological research with NIDA researchers. The institute, which sponsored Okruhlica's ten-month fellowship at Johns Hopkins, is seeking to step up its international programs, and is planning a conference of CEE drug researchers in Brno, Czech Republic in October 1997.

All three members of the delegation agreed that public awareness of the heroin problem is very high in their country, and prevention programs are proliferating in schools. The challenge will be to provide the many new drug users with adequate treatment when they seek it. As of now, Slovakia has four "centers for treatment of drug addictions," combined inpatient/outpatient facilities that were converted from alcohol abuse centers, and is planning on opening three more across the country.

"The number of personnel in [drug] abuse centers has dropped since 1989, due to the changes in our health system," Haber said. "It is not a very attractive vocation now... But I hope that medical personnel can be recruited to this specialization. We have created a new section of drug addiction within the health care system. It will assist in recruiting more personnel and the salaries will be made attractive."

The Slovak health sector's efforts also will focus on drug treatment in prisons and providing care for drug-dependent mothers and pregnant women. A needle exchange program for intravenous drug users began three years ago at the treatment center in Bratislava, where most of the drug users in Slovakia reside, and has been effective in keeping the country's HIV-positive rates so low, according to Okruhlica. The health ministry estimates that there are only 100 HIV-positive people residing in Slovakia, a nation of five million.

Because Põnisovõ's office in the Slovak government coordinates all ministries that have a stake in the fight against drugs - health, education and justice, for example - she is interested in recruiting all segments of the community to her cause. She pointed to the work of the healthy communities partnership in Petralka, which has involved local residents in drug prevention efforts aimed at teenagers, as an example: "I think there is a need to start with similar community approaches in other parts of Slovakia due to the fact that the age for drug abuse is declining all the time. Already we have nine-year-old drug addicts." "We have learned a lot," Põnisovõ said of the study tour. "Our intention is to use the experiences we have had here and implement them in our country, of course with regard to the cultural specificities of our country." Okruhlica said drug treatment professionals in his country have many objectives to meet in a short time, while the "epidemic" of substance abuse worsens: "I like to compare it to the man who tries to construct a shelter in the middle of a storm."