

Partnership Works

Turcianske Teplice--Cleveland

Throughout April, residents of Turcianske Teplice, Slovakia, which is participating in a healthy communities partnership with MetroHealth System in Cleveland, Ohio, took part in events to improve their health and environment. From World Health Day on April 7--which this year focused on healthy cities--to Earth Day on April 22, the town was bustling with activity.

A health walk inspired some residents to include exercise in their daily routines, others planted trees and some picked up garbage littering the town. During the month, town officials set up a pilot blood pressure monitoring station at city hall. Although the equipment was borrowed from a nearby city, the town's mayor, physician Alena Chlapkov, said the town hopes to install its own screening center.

The high point of the April events was a poster contest for children in the Turcianske Teplice elementary school in which students were asked to paint their visions of a clean and healthy town. Winner Katarina Tumpachov, age 11, depicted the concept of "an apple a day keeps the doctor away." All the posters were displayed around the town.

Tallinn--Washington, DC

As part of its goal to present women's health as a unique area of care that can benefit from a multi-disciplinary approach, the Tallinn-Washington, DC partnership held a two-day advanced women's health life support course this spring in Tallinn. About 80 physicians and several nurses attended the event, which was taught by five doctors and a nurse practitioner from George Washington University Hospital.

Topics of instruction included women's disease prevention, hormone replacement, cervical cytology and pelvic pain. One of the more popular sessions touched on psychiatric diseases. Mary Jean Kendell, the George Washington University (GWU) nurse practitioner who taught the session, said Estonian health care providers are just beginning to ask questions about mental health.

" It is my understanding that, prior to their independence, to admit you were depressed or talk about any kind of psychological concern almost resulted in your loss of rights as a citizen," she said." So I tried to convey that this is a medical illness and you can recover from it."

Kendell said participants were particularly interested in learning how to treat seasonal affective disorder in women, and how to handle bereavement issues with women who have lost infants. In the US, 25 percent of female patients who have lost a child will switch doctors because they " just can't connect" after the death, she said.

One Estonian physician told Kendell that she had lost a patient under similar circumstances: " She said to me, 'it scared me. I wanted to help but didn't know how.'"

The course was designed to convey information for use in treatment, but course materials will also be used by Estonian physicians and nurses in teaching settings. " They are eager and hungry for information on women's health," Kendell said.

The Tallinn-Washington partnership also conducted a five-day " Medical Management of Disasters and Hazardous Materials Incidents" course in mid-May in Tallinn. Three physicians, a nurse and a paramedic from GWU presented lectures, case studies and drills on topics such as

disaster planning, physical properties of hazardous materials, approaching a hazardous materials site, and decontamination of the patient.

Tashkent--Chicago

Several staff members from the University of Illinois at Chicago and AIHA were recently named honorary professors of the Science Council of the Second State Medical Institute in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The awards recognize the educational efforts of the partnership and support continued collaboration between the two academic centers, according to Hamid Karimov, rector of the Institute.

Since the partnership began in 1992, more than 30 clinical and academic staff of the Institute have received intensive training in a range of medical specialties, including pediatrics and neonatology, obstetrics and high-risk maternal care, orthopedics, pathology, neurosurgery, interventional radiology, and internal medicine. Because of these educational exchanges, the institute has reported a reduction in length of hospital stay, declines in underutilized hospital beds, improvements in ambulatory care, and advances in care for high-risk infants. Similarly, the institute's neurosurgery equipment has been upgraded, more than \$600,000 in medical equipment has been shipped to the institute, and a teaching center for neonatology and perinatology has been created to provide regional training.

L'viv-Buffalo and L'viv-Detroit

The Ukrainian Ministry of Health cited AIHA's two L'viv partnerships as models of neonatal care during a nationwide neonatal conference this spring. Rising infant mortality rates in Ukraine, which increased from 13.4 per 1,000 births in 1992 to 14.6 per 1,000 births in 1994, and a low birth rate prompted the conference.

Of great interest to the Ministry of Health is AIHA's neonatal resuscitation program at L'viv Oblast Clinical Hospital. The program succeeded in lowering the infant mortality rate for low-birth weight babies at the hospital from 9.4 percent in 1992 to 5.2 percent in 1993. The hospital credits its relatively low infant mortality rate to its aggressive resuscitation program, which began in 1993 with the help of partners at the Henry Ford Health System in Detroit, Michigan. The partnership discussed its achievements at the conference, noting the importance of teamwork between physicians and nurses in the neonatal intensive care unit, increased monitoring of vital signs and new prenatal educational programs for parents to be.

Health care professionals from the Perinatal Center in L'viv also presented results of their collaboration in prenatal care with partners from the Millard Fillmore Hospitals in Buffalo.

Elena Sulima, MD, head of neonatology for the Ministry of Health, said she was interested in expanding the partnerships' model programs to other areas in Ukraine, particularly mechanical ventilation training to help babies in respiratory distress.

Riga--St. Louis

With diphtheria, salmonella and respiratory disease on the rise among Latvia's children, a three-day pediatric infectious disease conference in April sponsored by the Riga, Latvia and St. Louis, Missouri partnership drew great interest from pediatric health practitioners across Latvia.

Transport of the newborn infant, treatment of otitis media (inflammation of the middle ear) and meningitis, immunization schedules and use of the diagnostic laboratory were a few of the subjects presented before 200 doctors and nurses. Over 300 pages of instructional material was provided to participants, combining practical and theoretical information on prevention and management of pediatric infectious diseases.

Conference co-chair, Dace Gardovska, MD, associate professor at the Latvian Academy of Medicine, said the success of the conference lay in the fact that each topic was presented from "two sides" --Latvian and American. "There was very good collaboration and all topics were planned together," she said. "We saw actual problems and how to solve them, and it opened new topics for discussion. Our colleagues now understand what are our problems. It is very good that our partners got to know what we need."

Co-chair Penelope Shackelford, MD, of Washington University Medical School in St. Louis, said improving the diagnostic microbiology lab at Republic Children's Hospital in Riga will be a priority for the partnership. Because the lab is currently not equipped to perform blood or spinal fluid cultures, the cause of infectious disease sometimes goes unidentified and more powerful antibiotics must be used in treatment, at great cost to the hospital, she noted.

Odessa--Brooklyn

Partners from Ukraine's Odessa Oblast Hospital (OOH) and Coney Island Hospital celebrated three years of exchange in April. They commemorated the anniversary at Coney Island during a trip by OOH physicians and nurses, who were visiting to learn advanced techniques in endoscopic urological and percutaneous renal surgery.

New York City council representative Howard Lasher attended the Coney Island banquet to honor the partnership and gave commemorative "Big Apple" (New York's nickname) pins to Odessa partners. Lasher was joined by New York State Assembly Representative Jules Polonetsky, who noted the achievements of the partnership program in laparoscopic surgery and infection control methods, which have resulted in significant reductions in morbidity and mortality and improvements in patient care at OOH.

"The AIHA program is a fantastic program because it links our community and Coney Island Hospital on an international level," noted Polonetsky, an American of Russian/Polish descent who represents the district with the highest immigrant population in the state. Thirty percent of patients at CIH are from Ukraine and Russia.

Minsk--Pittsburgh

Over half of all children born in Belarus are ill at birth, according to Belarus Ambassador Syarghei Martynau. Speaking at the US Congressional ten-year anniversary hearing on Chernobyl in April, Martynau asked for "new and vigorous international assistance" to respond to growing health needs in Belarus.

The AIHA partnership between Minsk Children's Hospital No. 4 in Belarus and Pittsburgh Children's Hospital in Pittsburgh is responding to that need through its intensive educational training program in pediatric care. An April pediatrics symposium in Minsk brought together 250 health care professionals from throughout Belarus to discuss issues ranging from toxicology to immunization and screening to oncology.

"We learned that we have a lot of similar issues," explained Miriam Bloom, pediatrician for Children's Hospital in Pittsburgh, adding that environmental hazards are a main concern in both communities. Bloom said that increased outreach programs in the Belarussian community have increased public awareness of avoidable hazards like tobacco and lead poisoning.

These outreach efforts have had similar positive results in Bloom's community, where Olympic gold medal gymnast Olga Korbut is leaping into action again by organizing the Belarus-American Child Health Foundation. Working with AIHA partners at Pittsburgh Children's, Korbut recently organized a benefit concert with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, during which funds were raised from concert goers for Belarussian hospitals to fill medication and other needs in response to an estimated 200-fold increase in childhood thyroid cancer.

"Olga modernized gymnastics," said Pittsburgh Children's director of endocrinology Thomas Foley. "And now, I like to think of her as modernizing medicine in her country 20 years later."

Zagreb--Lebanon

Since the outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia, Croatia's hospitals have been plagued with a shortage of money and supplies, while an influx of refugees has led to a surge in infectious disease. As a result, nosocomial infections have become a significant health risk for Croatian patients, and health care providers are seeking to introduce new standards and methods to curb that risk.

At the first country-wide conference on nosocomial infections held May 22-24 in Zagreb, clinical teams including doctors, nurses, pharmacists and epidemiologists from throughout Croatia presented information on issues ranging from war wounds care to the role of the infection control nurse to the benefits of Hepatitis B vaccination. In addition, participants were briefed on the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention guidelines for isolation precautions in hospitals by CDC's Scot Kellerman.

"The Croatian doctors identified this as a significant issue," said conference organizer Steven Kairys, MD, MPH, of Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. "One of the most dangerous places to be is the hospital, and prolonged hospitalization is still the norm there, so the chance for infection greatly increases." Kairys added that, in non-US settings, the cost-effectiveness of preventing nosocomial infection needs to be emphasized along with the clinical benefits. "Some people think it's overdone and not efficient--but it's not rocket science, it's basic hand washing and using gloves."

About 200 health professionals attended the conference, including AIHA partner representatives from Zagreb and Zadar. A smaller group met with the Croatian Minister of Health prior to the conference to discuss the work of the Ministry's Hospital Infection Control Committee. Additional participants were invited from Albania and Romania.

Chisinau--Hennepin

Moldovan health professionals debated four diverse topics, from cardiology to graduate and postgraduate education to the role of nurses in public health to pre- and intra-hospital diagnosis and treatment of medical emergencies at a conference held in late April in Chisinau. The medical/nursing conference, entitled "Partnership in Public Health," drew nearly 400 medical professionals, including a 14-person delegation from Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Nurses at the conference established guidelines for nurse/physician collaboration, care for operative patients, patient teaching methodologies, and infection control measures.

The US Ambassador to Moldova, the USAID Representative in Moldova, the Moldovan Minister of Health, a WHO representative from the European Regional Office, and the president of the Romanian Nurses Association attended the opening ceremonies.

Almaty--Tucson Sixteen-year-old Olga Hikalova was in her Almaty neighborhood when she was bitten by a venomous cobra. Olga's parents immediately called the city's central emergency hotline to seek help. The emergency medical worker responding to the call contacted Elzhan Birtanov, MD, director of the recently opened Almaty Toxicology Information Center, and within minutes Birtanov had the necessary antitoxin to treat the child. Olga was admitted to the toxicology department with a severe poisoning on the evening of May 3, 1996 and discharged two weeks later.

For Olga, the opening of the center on April 23 was a real lifesaver. For Birtanov, the establishment of Almaty's first poison information center at the Almaty First Aid Hospital was the result of two years' renovation and collaboration with US partners at the Arizona Poison Control Center in Tucson, Arizona.

"The center was created to respond to the increasing number of patients suffering from unidentifiable toxins in the city of Almaty," said Birtanov. He hopes to increase public awareness of the dangers of toxins through informational campaigns, and has already begun to distribute the Center's first informational bulletin on toxins. Toxicologists working at the Center spend their free time informing school children, teachers, medical staff and the Almaty community about the dangers of certain toxins, including alcohol poisoning.