

Tirana-Bronx Partnership Holds Health Fair

By Julia Ross

When the congregants of Our Lady of Good Counsel church in the Bronx, NY arrived for mass one Sunday morning this summer, a banner greeted them with "Mirëserdhjet!"- "welcome" in Albanian.

The greeting came from the Bronx's Jacobi Medical Center, which, along with participation from two of its three partner hospitals in Tirana, Albania, sponsored a health fair at the church to reach out to the community's 150,000 Albanian-Americans. The June fair, a first for many of the hundreds who attended, was modeled on similar events Jacobi has held in various Bronx neighborhoods, but was tailored to Albanian-American health needs and provided information on topics such as children's health and safety, women's health, prenatal care, and the effects of smoking and high cholesterol intake.

A range of activities made the fair an interactive event. Attendees were able to choose from about 50 different fliers and pamphlets translated into Albanian - "Taking Your Child's Temperature," "Breastfeeding Advantages," and "Warning Signs in Pregnancy," for example - and free child's thermometers and disposable diapers were available for new parents. A "Smokey Sue" doll showed onlookers how tar is extracted from cigarettes, children learned how to take a pulse, and even the priest had his blood pressure checked. One display showed the effects of smoking on the body's different organs, and women took home cards showing them how to conduct a breast self-examination.

Susan Mueller, partnership representative and public relations director at Jacobi, said one of the hospital's goals was to show a group of 14 visiting Albanian clinicians and administrators how to plan a health fair, with the idea that they would be able to set up their own fair back in Albania. "We wanted to go into this community, and the church had written a letter of support for us when we were applying for the partnership, so it made sense. We planned it while the group [of Albanians] was here, so it was good for us and good for them too."

The Jacobi staff made an effort to structure the fair around health issues that affect the Albanian-American community. High cholesterol levels, for example, are common in the population due to a diet rich in cheese and red meat, Mueller said. To address this problem, the fair provided materials from the American Heart Association, translated by Evia Alikaj, MD, an Albanian now working at Jacobi, that identified healthy eating and exercise as preventive measures.

Vida Catalic, a respiratory therapist at Jacobi who is Albanian-American, spent the day getting people to measure their lung capacity by breathing into peak flow meters - one of the fair's more popular activities. She said high smoking rates remain a problem in the community, especially among men, but people are sufficiently aware of the health risks attached to smoking. When one woman measured 150 on a peak flow meter, signalling possible bronchitis or asthma, Catalic referred her to a physician.

Linda Ciu, MD, a neonatologist at the University Maternity Hospital in Tirana who was visiting Jacobi for several weeks to receive training in ultrasound techniques, also participated in the fair. She said her hospital would like to plan a similar health fair late in the summer.

"It is a new idea for us, of course," she said, "but I think they will appreciate it more [in Albania] because primary care is so limited there. Here people can consult with their doctors."

The fair's attendees, who spanned all ages, were eager to learn about what defines good health. One father gathered up coloring books and pediatric health pamphlets for his wife and three children, who were at home. He said his wife would be grateful for the information: "To know something is never a damage, you know, it's always a positive."