

Conference Overview: Sharing a Commitment to Caring

By Barbara Ruben

In St. Petersburg's stately Mariinsky Palace, which houses the city's assembly and serves as a symbol of the region's evolving embrace of democracy, participants in AIHA's third annual conference examined their own parallel evolution in the quality of medical care. More than 500 health care leaders from the United States (US), the New Independent States (NIS), and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) shared their progress and ideas for improving health care systems. The conference, "Managing Quality for Healthy Outcomes," ran from October 16-19, 1995.

"It has become increasingly clear that the most important contribution of the partnerships lies in transforming the way in which we think about health care services and in nurturing systemic reform," said AIHA executive director James P. Smith. "We see the impact everywhere and at all levels, especially in the organization and application of new systems of infection control and pre-hospital care, in the struggle to develop responsible forms of privatization, in the changing role of nurses, in the development of modern management and financial methods and in the design of new regional and national delivery and payment systems."

In order to make lasting changes in these areas, the priority for health care professionals must be to focus on the caliber of their work, said Alexandre Tsaregorodtsev, MD, then first deputy minister of health and now minister of health for the Russian Federation. "In this country we have introduced a system of medical insurance. We now need to introduce new notions that serve the consumers of medicine and assess the costs of medical care. At the same time, we must not deny the accumulated experience of the traditional system of health."

Tsaregorodtsev, however, noted that the medical system "in its current form is not satisfactory," citing concerns about access to medical information and supplies and rising infectious disease rates.

Terrance Tiffany, director of the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) office of environment and health in Moscow, also raised concerns about the health of residents in the NIS. "There is a tremendous challenge. The overall health status of people in this region continues to decline. Rising infant mortality and lower life expectancy portray a health care system in crisis."

According to Yuri Komarov, MD, director of Medsoceoninform with the Russian Federation Ministry of Health, the average life expectancy of Russian males fell to an "alarming" 57.3 years in 1995, down from 63 just five years ago. An increase in suicide--particularly steep among teenage girls and middle-age men in Russia--coupled with rising homicide and accident rates have contributed to this trend, he said. Komarov noted the increase of such infectious diseases as cholera and tuberculosis and mental illness, including schizophrenia.

In the face of these sobering trends, health care providers must change their outlook to include a more comprehensive approach. "There never was a doctor in Russia who looked after a patient from financial, efficiency and health care perspectives," he said.

"You are not working in isolation. Providing health care depends on so many other aspects of the life of society," John Evans, US Consul General to St. Petersburg told conference participants. "Problems in health are fully interconnected with the workings of the economy, with education, with the supply of energy, with nutrition, and of course, with politics."

In striving to fix their faltering health care systems, "people are realizing they must take responsibility for their own health, whether in emergency medicine services in Vladivostok, family planning in Moscow or diabetes education in Dubna," Tiffany said, citing three of AIHA's

partnerships in Russia. "Your participation is leading the way to healthier populations in this generation and generations to come."

And that participation increasingly includes principles of quality management, in which health care providers strive to bring patients the best care in a cost-efficient manner. Using continuous quality improvement (CQI) as an evaluation tool, health care professionals need to learn to "do more with less," said Alan Weinstein, president of Premier Health Alliance, which includes more than 1,000 health care organizations in the US.

Using quality management, hospitals must evaluate the staff involved to determine if their work loads need to be shifted; make sure measurement systems, from clocks to x-ray equipment, are accurate; ensure materials are being used efficiently; survey the methods being used to complete a task; and use up-to-date technology.

"It is important to plan and aim before you fire away on specific problems. You should adapt the model to fit your needs," Weinstein recommended. For example, the L'viv Oblast Clinical Hospital in Ukraine used CQI methods to reduce neonatal mortality from 6.3 to 3 per 100 at-risk babies, and Russia's Murmansk Regional Hospital cut the average length of stay of cardiac patients from 15 to 10 days.

While existing partners are refining their work and sharing new insights into quality, three new NIS partnerships are just getting off the ground. Four Semipalatinsk, Kazakstan hospitals, paired with Houston, TX-based Methodist Hospital, are confronting the effects of nuclear testing in the Semipalatinsk area, including setting up a cancer registry. Last September, the Donetsk Oblast Traumatology Center in Ukraine and Orlando Regional Healthcare System in Florida began working together. And City Clinical Hospital No.2 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, recently began working with Boulder Community Hospital in Boulder, CO to focus a program on nursing.

But more than any single evaluation tool or measurement matrix, the focus of the conference revolved around a sense of shared mission.

"The partnership program is very important because it bridges our knowledge of health care between our countries. On both sides of the globe we have learned about common EMS problems and how each responds in emergency situations. For this knowledge, I am forever grateful," said Alexander Partin, MD, director of the Vladivostok EMS Center, who works in partnership with the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond, VA.

"Any objective analysis of the impact of this program fails to capture the human dimension of these partnerships and the success that they have had in bringing communities and people of good will together, people who for so long were separated by what seemed to be insurmountable walls," said Daniel Borque, senior vice president of VHA, Inc. and chair of the AIHA Board of Directors.

US First Lady Hillary Clinton shared a similar sentiment in a videotaped message to conference participants. "Your success proves that the spirit of volunteerism and an ethic of respect among medical professionals in different countries is strong," she said. "Thank you for bringing the technical expertise and experience of our country to those countries who themselves are struggling so hard to realize the promise of democracy and prosperity. This kind of partnership will truly build a better future for us all."