

Georgia Opens First Pediatric Emergency Room in the South Caucasus, Establishes New Paradigm of Proficient, Well Designed Urgent Care for Children

When Georgian physician Irakli Sasania was in Israel studying for his master's degree in public health during the late 1990s, his dormitory room window looked out onto an enormous hospital. He recalls that the first floor of the building housed an emergency room, noting, "Each day, I watched the precise teamwork of the staff and I was filled with interest and admiration for their work." Intrigued, he decided to learn more about the model of the unit and was impressed by its effectiveness.

When Sasania returned home, he began a detailed study of the emergency care system in Georgia. He discovered that there were no emergency units in the country that provided an effective alternative for patients who needed short-term diagnostic and emergency care. Instead, all patients requiring urgent care were first checked by an ambulance crew or at the admission department of a regional multi-profile hospital, where triage was performed and patients were then sent to the department specializing in their problems. A similar system was used by children's hospitals.

Even more perplexing, Sasania says, was the fact that all resuscitation departments in Georgia, as well as in the other countries of the former Soviet Union, were located on the upper floors of hospitals. "As a result of this thoughtless design, some patients died in the elevators," he stresses, explaining that the very idea that a person could die within the hospital due to an inefficient admission system is absurd. It is even more appalling when the matter concerns children.

When Sasania became director of Iashvili Children's Central Hospital (CCH) in Tbilisi, he began to actively work to change the concept of emergency care. His goal was to create an emergency room designed to be housed on the ground floor. An emergency room designed to take into account all of the technical and architectural nuances that would make it possible to provide the highest quality urgent care to his patients.

Laying a Strong Foundation for Positive Changes

Bringing his idea to life turned out to be a complicated matter, according to Sasania, although he is quick to admit that he never thought it would be easy. His first challenge was to find funding to create this new unit. The financial crisis that occurred in Georgia as the young country became independent made it necessary to find sponsors from both the commercial sector and from foreign NGOs working in the country. He also looked to NGOs to provide technical assistance in terms of training his staff in modern approaches and methods of providing emergency care as the model he wished to follow had been used successfully for many years in many Western countries.



Georgian physician Irakali Sasania's vision was the driving force behind the establishment of the first state-of-the-art pediatric emergency room in the South Caucasus Region at Iashvili Children's Central Hospital's Emergency Pediatric Center in Tbilisi.



All of this “behind-the-scenes” work took two years. During this time, Sasania and his supporters managed not only to convince private sponsors and NGOs of the importance of providing effective, expert care to Georgia’s children, but they also won the support of the country’s leadership, which approved his initiative and provided staffing and material, as well as political, support for the unit.



Experts from Atlanta worked side-by-side with their Georgian counterparts, providing hands-on clinical training. Here, the Georgian specialists take part in a Pediatric Advanced Life Support (PALS) course.

In 2003, the team of physicians and nurses assembled to staff the unit began receiving technical assistance from American partners from Emory University’s School of Medicine and Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta at Egleston, Georgia, which began working with CCH under AIHA’s Tbilisi/Atlanta partnership. Trips to Atlanta gave Georgian specialists the opportunity to study the technology used in American pediatric emergency rooms. When the US experts visited Tbilisi, emergency room staff there received advice on how to provide the most effective critical care. In the course of their work, the American and Georgian specialists studied detailed methods of conducting triage and providing urgent care for a broad range of injuries, as well as

reviewed complex clinical cases and jointly determined the most effective methods of providing care and treatment to patients in critical conditions given local resources and conditions.

The remodeling process for the new emergency room, as well as its outfitting with new furniture and modern laboratory and diagnostic equipment, involved more than 22 organizations, including Rustavi-2, a national television network in Georgia; GEOCELL, a mobile communications company; Maggie Style, a construction company; the well-known food and beverage company Nestle; the Georgian representative office of the worldwide restaurant chain McDonalds; the Swedish Agency for International Development; and many other organizations that were moved by Sasania’s energy and admirable idea.

Reflecting on their involvement, Irma Tskitishvili, GEOCELL’s public relations manager, says that sponsoring this project is the most significant charitable act in the company’s history. “We felt that by helping to create the pediatric emergency room, we were helping to save the lives of our own children,” she said during the ceremony officially opening the new unit, which was held on June 1, 2004, to coincide with International Children’s Day.



Not only is the new Pediatric Emergency Center outfitted with modern, efficient diagnostic equipment, it has also been designed to be a pleasant, non-threatening place for its young patients.

In addition to the fact that the unit is equipped with powerful diagnostic resources and the staff has access to the latest methods of providing medical care, all of the unit's services are provided free of charge. For Georgia — which introduced insurance-based medical care several years ago — such generosity is rare.

This important aspect was noted by Georgian President Mikhael Saakashvili in a speech during the opening ceremony. Expressing certainty that "the unit will meet one of our most urgent needs." Saakashvili also expressed concern that many Georgian citizens were currently unable to receive specialized care due to the cost of medical services — a fact made even sadder when it is the nation's innocent children who lack access to critical healthcare services. "This unit will help provide high-quality critical care to all children without exception," he said, while offering his sincere thanks for the efforts of all those who sacrificed their time and money to bestow such a precious gift on the people of Georgia.

The need for the unit is indeed clear. According to Sasania, in the first two months since it opened, the unit treated 1,711 children — 700 of whom required hospitalization. Having received the necessary care, the remaining 1,011 went home safely, he says, explaining that this represents a huge costs savings when compared to the old model of emergency care in which the proportion of patients requiring hospitalization would have been at least 40 percent higher.



Georgian President Mikhael Saakashvili spoke at the June 1, 2004, opening ceremony for the Iashvili Emergency Pediatric Center, stating, "This unit will help provide high-quality critical care to all children without exception."

Sasania continues, explaining that this reduction in the need for inpatient treatment is the result of the unit's ability to provide timely medical care. Several factors contribute to this, he says: first, the new unit offers comprehensive, around-the-clock emergency care; second, the unit is outfitted with modern diagnostic and laboratory equipment; and third, because it is extremely important that a child coming to the unit be immediately placed in the reliable hands of an entire team of specialists, each of whom quickly and efficiently performs a specific role starting with check-in, examination and triage, on to referral for further treatment as needed. By eliminating wasteful and inefficient systems — distant locations of laboratory and x-ray equipment organizing or insufficient staffing, for example — the unit can, in the majority of cases, avoid many of the complications that previously occurred under the old system.



During its first two months in operation, Iashvili ER staff treated more than 1,700 pediatric patients.

Early Assessments Show Improved Quality of Care, Patient Satisfaction

Studies show that both parents and children are satisfied with the work of the unit. According to foreign experts, the unit now surpasses similar institutions in the West. "This is the most modern pediatric emergency room that I have ever seen," says Kenneth Walker, a professor of medicine at Emory University's School of Medicine who along with his colleague Steven Lanski, a physician in the pediatric emergency room at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta at Egleston, has been actively involved in training the personnel for the new emergency unit through the Tbilisi/Atlanta partnership.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, both US partners expressed their conviction that once in operation, the sound of children crying will be heard much less often in Georgia. In his complimentary address, Lanski also noted that the unit is innovative not only for Georgia, but for Western countries such as the United States as well. He further stated that the extension and replication of its model could play an important role in improving children's health service delivery in any country throughout the world.

This opinion is shared by Lado Chipashvili, Georgia's Minister of Labor, Health, and Social Affairs, who later commented during an interview that, "The model created at CCH will definitely be followed in every emergency room in Georgia." During the same interview, Chipashvili stressed that the first steps in this direction had already been taken, explaining that negotiations were currently underway with the World Bank and other large donors to finance a continuation of the project to improve emergency medical care in the country.



Parents who bring their children to the Pediatric Emergency Center can count on the expertise and efficiency of its well-trained, caring staff of healthcare professionals.

The success of the project is clear, as is the fact that one man's desire to make the world a better place has brought about benefits to many. Some are inspired to do good things themselves and others receive help in times of trouble and misfortune. Sasania's experience shows that the most important thing is to be true to your idea and to see it through to the end.