

Educating Communities Through AIHA Partnerships

As more and more people begin to play an increasing part in managing their own health and well-being, the need for clear, accurate, and comprehensible information about healthy lifestyle choices, preventive medicine, and appropriate treatment options has become all too apparent. Healthcare professionals, too, realize that well-informed patients can make responsible decisions and take ownership of their own well-being. A strong advocate of investment in public health education and disease prevention programs, Dr. Yuri Shevchenko, minister of health of the Russian Federation, notes that healthcare—like defense—should be a key element of governmental policy and is, in fact, essential

to the security of any nation (see interviews with Dr. Shevchenko and other health ministers beginning on page 34).

This issue of *CommonHealth* focuses on the integral role public education about health issues can play in achieving partner objectives. By raising the profile of initiatives and services, increasing public awareness of issues, and highlighting the concerns and problems facing individual communities, healthcare professionals can increase the health literacy of the population, giving people the power to make informed, responsible decisions concerning their own health. Armed with accurate and understandable information, citizens can begin to take control of the daily choices they make about health-related issues. Knowledge in this case truly is power, and effective use of the media and public outreach programs can put this knowledge where it has the opportunity to do the most good—in the hands of the people.

But effective communication is not limited to reaching out to members of the community—these techniques are equally important as tools of political and legislative change. By highlighting parts of the healthcare system that are ineffective, bringing these flaws to the attention of policymakers, and suggesting strategies for implementing improvements, reform can take root on local, regional, and national levels.

Furthermore, as partners strive to develop business strate-



Illustration: Lima Chesak

gies geared toward sustainable health-care programs, using the media to communicate messages to their target audiences and draw attention to their services and objectives is a viable way to position the organization as a reliable, proactive authority in its area of specialization. This sort of positive media exposure can lead to an increased patient base, which in turn makes it easier to justify the facility and obtain additional funding.

This issue opens with an overview of effective public relations techniques and step-by-step methods of integrating both print and broadcast media into a public communications strategy. Several subsequent articles provide examples of how individual partners disseminate information about their fa-

ilities and services to their target audiences—the techniques illustrated can be easily adapted to meet the needs of any facility. Two articles by Barbara Ruben illuminate the different strategies used by partners to address common problems such as the treatment of diabetes and asthma, as well as issues ranging from smoking cessation to educating the public on healthy lifestyle choices. And Barbara Gabriel's story on the Ukrainian NGO MAMA-86 shows that important changes can be made when citizens work together toward a common goal. Dr. Daniela Bucur explores media relations and health literacy from the perspective of a working journalist, while Loti Popescu and Dr. Daniel Verman discuss effective ways partners can promote their services.

Rounding out the issue are interviews with the ministers of health of Belarus, Georgia, and Russia, as well as with three AIHA Board members. Finally, "From Kiev to Budapest" details a recent primary healthcare (PHC) conference in Kiev and previews the PHC partner conference to be held in Budapest this July.

These articles emphasize the need to incorporate public education strategies into the management structure of AIHA partner facilities. By joining forces with the communities they serve, healthcare professionals can increase the overall effectiveness of their programs and services. By involving the media in the process, partners can expand the number of people they reach.