

## NIS Conference Highlights Women's Health and Information Technology

*Conference coverage by Joanne Neuber, Julia Ross and Barbara Ruben*

The fourth annual AIHA Partnership Conference for the New Independent States brought together nearly 400 health care practitioners, ministry officials and other health care leaders from across the NIS and US in Des Moines, Iowa from October 7 to 9. From exploring a new definition of women's health that encompasses life-long care to new worlds opened up through telemedicine and the Internet, partners examined the strides that both health care and their own partnerships have made in just a few years.

"We have found a path to peace and common ground, and that brings us together today," Des Moines Mayor A. Arthur Davis said in welcoming participants to the conference. "Your nations and ours spend our efforts in the advancement of medical science and medical care. We share information. We share our successes. Sometimes we have to share our failures, and we share common challenges as well. That is the road that leads us ahead."

"You will experience the generosity of the people of Iowa and understand why this is truly the heartland of America. The tenets of partnership are strongly felt here in Iowa," AIHA Executive Director James P. Smith said. Iowa and Stavropol Krai in Russia have been sister states since 1988, and Mercy Medical Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and the Association of Iowa Hospitals & Health Systems (IH & HS) Iowa Hospitals are partners with Stavropol Regional Hospital and City Hospital No. 4. Stephen F. Brenton, chairman of the Iowa Hospital Education and Research Foundation and President of the IH & HS, noted that the Stavropol-Iowa partnership has hosted over 400 medical exchanges since it began in 1992 and donated more than \$1 million in medical equipment and supplies to krai hospitals.

"Projects like those represented here, true partnerships between true equals give us the chance to do good work and feel good in doing that," Brenton said.

Conference participants were offered a smorgasbord of options, from workshops on Internet research and women's nutritional needs, to site visits to rural hospitals, to a laparoscopic surgery clinical practicum. Breakout sessions included workshops on health insurance, pharmaceutical management, outcomes evaluation and a presentation of management success stories from partners across the NIS. Deans and rectors of medical schools also met to talk about common problems of physician supply.

Christopher Atchison, MPA, director of the Iowa Department of Public Health, called on his colleagues in the United States and the NIS to "come together as a public body, as a social enterprise, and understand the issues facing women, and also develop a system so that access to [those] services can be provided."

And on the technology front, partners demonstrated how far both they and information technology have evolved.

"I don't think anyone could imagine four years ago the dramatic changes in technology-- videoconferencing, Internet research, sharing clinical research," Smith said. "Our partners are really ahead of almost everyone in using the entire gamut of technology available worldwide."

Elaine Szymoniak, Iowa state senator and chair of the Joint State Legislative Committee on International Affairs, also lauded technological advances. "Initially it was so difficult to communicate with Stavropol, but now we've leapt past [traditional] mail service with e-mail. It is an indication of how much we're changing."

US government representatives also addressed conference participants.

"When USAID is asked to document accomplishments and delineate what can be seen as the result of our program, the list begins with your health partnerships... Together we can continue to build the bridges that truly ensure we are one global community," said Carolyn Coleman, acting director of the Office of Human Resources and Development for USAID's Europe and New Independent States (ENI) Bureau.

US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke to those at the conference via videotape, praising the partners for the progress they are making in improving women's health.

"I am grateful for all of your efforts to improve the quality of health care and for your coming together to share experiences and work together to solve some of our most difficult health problems," she told participants. "These efforts embody the spirit of community and volunteerism that is so needed in our world today."