

Latvians Include Seniors in Range of Health Initiatives

By Julia Ross

Since health care professionals in Riga, Latvia and St. Louis, Missouri began working together three years ago, improving geriatric care has become an integral part of their mission. Partnership initiatives in cardiology, hospice and community health have included Latvia's elderly population, and older residents of Riga and the rural town of Tukums are beginning to take advantage of health care services and outreach programs geared to their needs.

In a nation where many elderly smoke and few eat healthy diets, preventing heart attacks and clogged arteries can be a challenge for physicians and nurses and their older patients. With the assistance of US partners, a joint initiative between Riga's Bikur Holim Hospital and the Latvian Ministry of Health is tackling this problem head-on: A model cardiac care program under development aims to guide patients from an acute event through rehabilitation to education on nutrition, exercise and smoking cessation.

According to Arkadijs Gandzs, MD, director of Bikur Holim, the hospital's cardiology unit treats about 60 elderly patients each month, and is taking special steps to address the needs of this population as it makes improvements in care. A treadmill for stress-tests has been installed, and cardiology staff emphasize physical therapy and rehabilitation for older patients. Partners are also working together to tailor patient education materials for an elderly audience.

"Many of the elderly over there just don't want to talk about [heart disease]--they think that if they do, it will make their high blood pressure worse, for example," said Carol Wellons, RN, MSN, an adult health nurse practitioner affiliated with partner Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis. "We are trying to burst this bubble and convince them that to not discuss their [cardiac] problems will make the situation worse. We are also trying to bring in family members and let them know what they need to watch out for."

Riga's elderly are also benefiting from a groundbreaking partnership hospice program at Bikur Holim--the first in Latvia. Designed to provide pain and symptom control, physical therapy and psychological support to those with terminal illnesses and their families, the hospice gives comfort to senior citizens as well as to children and the middle-aged. However, elderly patients comprise about 70 percent of the hospice's monthly patient load.

Hospice physician Ludmila Shamsidnova said the response from older patients to hospice care has been uniformly positive: "We have a special book of references where patients and their families can express their opinion concerning treatment and service. Patients tell us that hospice care is extremely necessary and an important part of our health care system."

Outside Riga, the partnership has lent support and expertise to a new community health project in Tukums, where high school students and their grandparents are teaming up to publish a regional cookbook. The two generations are using the local high school's kitchen to prepare and record family recipes, which are then modified with the help of local nutritionists to reduce health risks. The resulting recipes are low in fat, high in nutrients and advocate safe food-handling practices. They will be compiled in a cookbook tentatively titled "My Grandmom's Table," which should be available this summer.

"The cookbook project is designed to promote interaction between youth and isolated elders and to address the high risk of food contamination in the community," said Barbara Bogomolov, RN, MS, partnership coordinator and manager for Community Health and International Services at Barnes-Jewish Hospital. Improper food storage and failure to practice regular handwashing has led to outbreaks of Salmonella and E.Coli infection in Tukums.

Bogomolov added that partners hope to use the cookbook to raise money from Latvian-American donors for other community health activities.