

Videoconferencing Van Brings Distance Learning to CEE

By Julia Ross

One of the first mobile videoconferencing units operating worldwide hit the road in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary last fall to bring new opportunities for distance learning to CEE partners.

A groundbreaking collaboration between AIHA and VideoBridge International Corporation of Worcester, Massachusetts, will make regular videoconferencing available for the first time in Czech Republic and Slovakia. The mobile unit, which consists of a portable satellite dish and a conference room videoconferencing package with related modems, will enable partners to conduct seminars, "case study" workshops, research collaboration sessions and partnership planning meetings, with colleagues in the US.

The VideoBridge equipment will establish links in 14 different locations in CEE over the next year.

"The opening of the Central European service is significant for two reasons," said VideoBridge president Harold R. Davis at the first partner videoconference held in Prague, Czech Republic last September. "First, it establishes this technology in a region that is developing modern economic systems very rapidly. Secondly, it provides much greater flexibility for videoconferencing needs by actually bringing the system to the user in situations where local communications will not support this technology."

VideoBridge has worked with AIHA previously to establish stationary videoconferencing sites in Moscow and Dubna, Russia, and another site is planned for Kiev, Ukraine. The Dubna-LaCrosse, Wisconsin partnership uses its videoconferencing capability one or two times a month to conduct seminars on issues ranging from nursing leadership to alcoholism treatment to diabetes care.

Lonna Milburn, RN, PhD, videoconferencing project coordinator for AIHA, said the videoconferencing initiative provides health care professionals with a valuable, cost-effective opportunity for cross-cultural exchange.

"Distance learning makes our partnership program much more sustainable," she said. "There are many hurdles to overcome when you work in an international setting, including language barriers and connectivity issues. But when you realize just how many people you can educate on both sides of the ocean with this tool, our goals seem attainable."

The first CEE videoconferences took place in September in Czech Republic as part of the graduation ceremonies for the Bohemia-Nevada and Olomouc-Richmond, Virginia health management education partnerships. Since its graduation, the Bohemia-Nevada partnership has hosted three additional videoconferences: one to coordinate a regional meeting of the five HME partnerships, one focusing on strategic planning for management faculties, and one to discuss the impact of diagnosis-related groups on medical practice and education.

"The benefit of this technology for us is that we can continue the work we started," said Mary Paterson, PhD, Bohemia-Nevada coordinator and director, Office of Health Care Policy Research, University of Nevada School of Medicine. "It means that we can continue joint curriculum planning as well as discuss new developments in health care reform. We are also planning to videotape some conferences for later use in the classroom."

Partners from Kosice, Slovakia and Providence, Rhode Island also used the mobile equipment last fall to initiate a transatlantic discussion on the applications of evidence-based medicine in neonatal care. William Cashore, MD, professor of pediatrics and a neonatologist at Women and

Infants Hospital in Providence, gave a presentation during the link-up while accompanying slides were shown to a roomful of participants in Kosice.

"I think it is a wonderful example of how technology can help to share information," said Peter Krcho, MD, neonatologist and information coordinator at Kosice Faculty Hospital. "It was an excellent way to show 50 nurses and physicians from our region that all the drugs used in neonatal care must be reviewed with the principles of evidence-based medicine. Some of them were surprised about the overview of some of the drugs after Professor Cashore's presentation and said, 'We must stop the use of that drug in such high doses.'"