

US First Lady Embraces Women's Health Programs in the NIS

By Joanne Neuber

During an eight-day, five-nation tour to the NIS last November, US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton applauded partners in Almaty, Kazakstan; Tashkent, Uzbekistan; and L'viv, Ukraine for their "tremendous efforts to improve the health of women and children" in their countries.

Mrs. Clinton's first stop on her more than 3,000-mile journey across Central Asia, Russia and Ukraine was at the Almaty Perinatal Center, where she participated in the opening of AIHA's third comprehensive Women's Wellness Center (WWC) with Almaty Center Director Tamara Chuvakova, MD, and US Partner Coordinator Emily Jenkins.

Accompanying Mrs. Clinton on her trip across the NIS were Richard Morningstar, special advisor to the US President and secretary of state for assistance to the NIS; Donald Pressley, USAID acting assistant administrator for the Bureau for Europe and the NIS; Melanne Verveer, White House chief of staff to First Lady Hillary Clinton; and James P. Smith, AIHA executive director.

"The work done here will reach far beyond these doors: When women are healthy, their children are healthy, and when families are healthy, countries are healthy," Mrs. Clinton said.

Wearing a traditional Kazak costume presented by hospital staff, Mrs. Clinton toured the center and spoke with patients about the various women's health services offered there. Akmaral Kalmuratova told Mrs. Clinton how prenatal childbirth education classes helped her and husband Marat prepare for the birth of their daughter.

"We were told it would be necessary to perform a C-section due to the large size of our child, but staff at the center encouraged us to deliver naturally," she said, proudly showing Mrs. Clinton her healthy newborn.

Kalmuratova is one of the first women in Kazakstan to participate in prenatal care classes, which now are offered at the center following months of staff training and site renovation by volunteers in the Almaty-Tucson, Arizona hospital partnership. The Women's Wellness Center targets women of all ages, providing services ranging from breast and cervical cancer screening to family planning to educational programs about domestic violence, sexually transmitted diseases and menopause.

Teenager Dalida Akhmetova told Mrs. Clinton how nurse educators from the center provided "useful and important" educational lectures on healthy lifestyles and sex education to her Almaty high school class. "I told my mother about the center, and she decided to visit it too," she said.

Elena Bogacheva, nurse manager at the center and one of the first baccalaureate-degree graduates of the Almaty Medical (Nursing) College, explained how expansion of nursing roles has improved patient services and made the center a preferred care provider, with the help of Tucson partners.

"I think of this place as my home away from home," patient Valeriya Bukina said to Mrs. Clinton.

While in Almaty, Mrs. Clinton also spoke at a conference on the political rights of women in Central Asia. "Not enough women are sitting at the table when political and economic decisions are made about their lives and their families. This must change," she said, according to a Reuters report.

Other media from across the NIS and US covered the First Lady's tour extensively, and Mrs. Clinton wrote about her trip for the US news magazine *Newsweek*, citing the Women's Wellness Centers as "the result of a true public-private international partnership."

Mrs. Clinton next traveled to Tashkent, where she was greeted by Uzbek First Lady Tatiana Karimova. Like her US counterpart, Mrs. Karimova is a proponent of maternal and child health issues. She serves as the honorary president of the "Healthy Mother-Healthy Child" Uzbek humanitarian program.

Mrs. Karimova and Mrs. Clinton participated in the opening of the Tashkent Women's Wellness Center at the Maternity Building in the Second State Medical Institute (TASHMI II). Center Director Dilmurod Yusupov, MD, showed Mrs. Clinton the ultrasound equipment donated by US partners at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), during the June 1997 airlift of medical equipment by Operation Provide Hope ([See CommonHealth, Summer 1997](#)).

"This wellness center is a testament to the commitment of the doctors and nurses throughout Uzbekistan [who] will offer a wide range of family planning services--which is vital, if the rate of abortion in this country and in Central Asia is to be reduced," said Clinton.

Uzbek Health Minister Shavkat Karimov echoed the First Lady's words, noting the importance of prioritizing women's health programs. He commended the Tashkent-Chicago partnership for its efforts to create the wellness center that "will assist in promoting the health and well-being of women of all ages in Uzbekistan."

Mrs. Clinton's final stop was in L'viv, Ukraine, where she toured the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and the Neonatal Resuscitation Training Center (NRTC) at L'viv Oblast Clinical Hospital (LOCH) with Ukrainian First Lady Ludmila Kuchma.

Dmytro Dobriansky, MD, director of the L'viv Neonatal Resuscitation Center, told Clinton how the L'viv-Detroit, Michigan neonatal resuscitation program has trained over 400 health care practitioners in the region and contributed to a significant reduction in infant mortality in L'viv Oblast since 1993.

"We can now say that the intensive care unit at LOCH has a high level of care, comparable to that in the US," said US partner Sudhakar Ezhuthachan, MD, DCH, Henry Ford Health System, Department of Pediatrics, Detroit, Michigan.

During the tour of LOCH, Mrs. Clinton also observed the arrival of a second ambulance donated by hospital partners with the help of funds contributed by Ford Motor Company. Used to transport critically ill, premature infants to the NICU within a 100-mile radius of the hospital, these ambulances are "real life-savers," said former patient Anna Venglinska, who met Mrs. Clinton during the tour.

"I gave birth to a child that weighed 900 grams, and had only a slim chance of surviving. Now, he is three years old and healthy," Venglinska told Mrs. Clinton, according to a *Kiev Post* report.

With tears in her eyes and a happy, lively three-year-old running around her, Venglinska thanked Mrs. Clinton and the American people for their help.

"Clearly this model works, and we can establish such centers throughout Ukraine," said Mrs. Clinton.