

Hungarian Hospital Partnerships Spur Diverse Improvements

By David Knesel

To veteran American health care workers facing a managed care environment, the in-patient length-of-stay numbers in Hungary will summon a wave of nostalgia. Five to six days for a normal birth. Weeks, instead of days, for post-surgical related incidents. According to the Hungarian Welfare Minister Gyorgy Szabo, "Many Hungarian hospital beds are used for 'social care,' rather than health care. The elderly and the long-term disabled are often kept in hospital beds for extended periods." Hungarian officials say they want to reduce both the amount of time patients spend in the hospital and the country's total number of hospital beds by one-third over the next three to four years.

Reducing length of stay is also the top priority of the AIHA partnership that began last year between Jvorsky dn Hospital in Vc, Hungary and Forsyth Memorial Hospital and Carolina Medicorp, Inc. (CMI) in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. CMI is a not-for-profit holding company that operates three hospitals, two nursing homes, three rehabilitation centers, a large home health service and a network of over 70 primary care physicians in North Carolina. Jvorsky dn Hospital is an 847-bed community hospital with 12 clinical and five diagnostic departments. The hospital admits approximately 22,000 inpatients and receives 150,000 outpatient visits a year. Vc is about 20 miles northwest of Budapest.

"Our objectives are ambitious. It helps that our partners are dedicated to improving the total health system in their region," said CMI Home Health Director Frances Hutchison, RN. "They are doing an excellent job in building a cooperative relationship with the family physicians in their area. The missing link is a stronger home health program, and Carolina Medicorp can offer a great deal of support, education and on-the-job training in many home health disciplines."

Using a team approach, the partners are applying the continuous improvement philosophy advocated by AIHA and clinical improvement techniques to decrease lengths of stay for patients with diabetes, colostomies and strokes through improved home care and family medicine systems. In the future, partners plan to determine the potential for decreasing lengths of stay in other areas such as enteral nutrition, peritoneal dialysis, psychiatry, and mother and baby care.

Managerial objectives tie closely to the clinical objectives. For example, a team of financial and clinical improvement experts from CMI will work with the Vc Hospital to develop a financial model for improving the Vc region's home health reimbursement system. Other goals involve improving information and communications systems, establishing a volunteer program and strengthening preventive maintenance services.

Hungary is also the site of two health care partnerships that were sponsored directly by USAID from 1991 through 1996. One partnership transformed a small Budapest hospital into one of Hungary's premier cardiac care facilities, while the other improved the treatment of pediatric cancer patients throughout Hungary. Both programs have provided extensive training opportunities for Hungarian medical personnel--nurses as well as physicians--through exchange visits and continuing education courses. These early partnership efforts were precursors to AIHA's hospital partnership.

In collaboration with Inova Institute of Research and Education, Fairfax Hospital and Prince William Hospital in Manassas, Virginia, Budapest's St. Francis Hospital established a modern four-bed cardiac care unit and an eight-bed post-cardiac care unit. The partners implemented a quality improvement program at the hospital and sponsored seminars for cardiologists from Hungary and other CEE countries. In addition, the partnership developed a community

outreach program to educate the public about diet and lifestyle, conduct cholesterol screening and provide rehabilitation for post-cardiac patients.

Brochures and instructional materials on lifestyle changes that promote cardiovascular health developed by the partners are now being used by school teachers throughout Budapest. Hungarian cardiologists trained at U.S. hospital partnerships provide continuing medical education seminars for cardiologists and community physicians in addition to patient education on cardiac rehabilitation. St. Francis cardiologists created a bi-weekly journal club to discuss and review topics from current western medical journals with other cardiologists from the surrounding region. A regional cardiovascular seminar in November 1995, which was hosted by St. Francis Hospital, provided an opportunity for more than 75 primary care physicians from nine CEE/NIS countries to interact.

The second partnership, which involves Semmelweis Medical University and the National Institute for Neurosurgery in Budapest and the University of Kansas Medical Center in Kansas City, Kansas, set up a national pediatric cancer registry to facilitate the evaluation of various treatment methods. Partners began a special training course for pediatric oncology nurses, increased access to magnetic resonance imaging and improved access to medical literature.

The partners designed a new therapeutic protocol for pediatric oncology patients and implemented an improved system for monitoring patients during treatment. The new protocol has significantly increased the survival rate of children undergoing cancer treatment at Semmelweis and improved their quality of life.

David Knesel, manager of corporate communications at CMI, contributed to this article.