

Privatization and Education Are Priorities for Georgian Health Minister

In February, Georgian Minister of Health Avtandi Jorbenadze signed an agreement with the World Bank to promote an expanded health project for the Georgian Republic. With the \$14 million loan, the project will build on a number of programs already being addressed by AIHA's Tbilisi-Atlanta partnership, including human resource and facilities development, maternal/child health, health finance reform and project administration.

Jorbenadze, a cardiologist, graduated from Tbilisi State Medical University in 1975 and served as a physician in the Soviet army. Following his two-year service, he worked in Tbilisi Hospital No. 1. In 1984, Jorbenadze entered the Georgian City Health Department; he was appointed Minister of Health in November 1993.

CommonHealth Managing Editor Joanne Neuber spoke with Jorbenadze during his visit to Washington, DC.

CommonHealth: Which part of the World Bank project is most important for health care in your country?

Jorbenadze: We met with World Bank representatives to discuss ways in which they can help us promote our Georgian health reform program that began just one year ago. The main component of our program is privatization of health care. The World Bank will provide credits to us to assist with the necessary expenses for privatization itself.

The most important part is the reorientation of the Georgian health care system. A first step in reorientation is financing and identifying the economic motives of the health care system. Hospitals will then operate on a competitive basis. Despite the fact that we have many financial problems with our system currently, we are trying to provide a responsive health care system for our citizens who absolutely need health care--but it will be a health care system that is paid for by the government. This is the most important aspect of our work.

We are also trying to secure health care coverage for uninsured citizens of Georgia, while working on a system of health insurance. This past August, we created the State Health Fund to finance all state programs that provide health care free-of-charge to the citizens of Georgia. Primary services covered under this plan include maternal and child health and immunization programs.

CommonHealth: What percent of the gross domestic product is allocated for health care in Georgia?

Jorbenadze: Now it is nearly four percent. In our current economic crisis, this four percent is very low...it is practically nothing. But the most important fact is that we now have a very effective project with the World Bank. And countries like America and Germany are also supporting our reforms, as well as the AIHA partnership program. This is assistance that is essential for us and our people in this difficult time. We are now in the most difficult, painful process. But I think that, step by step, the economy of Georgia will improve, and by the end of 1996, the citizens of Georgia will have an improved health care system.

CommonHealth: In this period of reform, what are the most important issues that you must deal with as Minister of Health?

Jorbenadze: The most serious reform is occurring in the system of medical and nursing education. Many of our medical schools are now operating as self-financed institutions. Yet our

medical education system doesn't meet the requirements of modern international standards. So we are reorganizing the system into a three-stage higher medical education system that is recognized internationally. Graduates of this system will have passed through a five-year basic medical education institution, followed by a two-year residency and specialized residency program.

CommonHealth: In an earlier interview with *CommonHealth*, you noted that close to two-thirds of the existing number of jobs for physicians would need to be eliminated. How are you dealing with this issue of oversupply?

Jorbenadze: We must reduce the level of applicants to medical schools. It will be a very difficult process to reduce the current physician level--that is always the most difficult part of reform. But we have begun to retrain our physicians to serve in other roles.

CommonHealth: You recently quit smoking. Do you consider yourself a model for the citizens of Georgia?

Jorbenadze: Yes. If one of the main directions of the Ministry of Health is healthy lifestyles, then the Minister must not smoke. And the Minister should not say one thing and do something completely opposite. And the Minister has shown that he is opposed to smoking--in this way, he is a model for his country.