

Primary Care Initiatives Help Strengthen Turkmenistan's Health System

USAID-funded Partnership Provides Training and Support to Improve Patient Care

As healthcare costs continue to skyrocket, preventive services have become an increasingly critical component of cost-effective, patient-centered health systems the world over. Periodic check-ups, early screening for a variety of ailments, proactive management of chronic conditions, and targeted patient education programs play such an important role in the provision of healthcare in most Western countries that these types of disease prevention and health promotion activities have virtually become second nature.

The healthcare system in Turkmenistan, like most of the nations of the former Soviet Union, didn't make it easy for people to access preventive services. For the 5 million people living in this Central Asian country, the old system's bureaucracy and red tape made seeking medical attention a long, arduous task. First, a patient had to sign up to see a general practitioner whose responsibility was to screen the individual and send him or her to an appropriate specialist. The patient would then move to a new line outside the specialist's office, sometimes waiting hours to be seen. Frequently, that clinician would send the patient to yet another specialist and the whole cycle would begin anew.

Instead of getting the care they needed, many patients simply could not or would not take the time to make their way through the unwieldy system. People who opted to ignore their symptoms rather than navigate through the requisite channels often developed chronic illnesses or came to be diagnosed when their disease was in an advanced stage with little hope for a positive outcome. The result was both devastating and financially draining for individuals and the nation alike.

In the early 1990s when the former Soviet Union fell, Turkmenistan and other countries in the region marked their independence by

launching much-needed healthcare reforms. At that time, the American International Health Alliance (AIHA) began working in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia to help build health system capacity through volunteer-driven partnerships that linked US health institutions with their counterparts overseas. Partners collaborate with each other and with AIHA staff and other experts to address healthcare concerns in the host communities. By 1998, primary healthcare and family medicine had emerged as key priorities throughout much of the region because both concepts represent cost-effective ways of delivering high-quality care and prevention services to broad segments of the population.

In 1999, AIHA established a partnership that linked the Turkmen Ministry of Health and Medical Industry and Health House No. 1 in the nation's capital of Ashgabat with the University of North Dakota, the North Dakota State Health Department, and a consortium of other healthcare provider organizations. The Ashgabat/North Dakota partnership opened a Family Medicine Training Center at the Health House in May 2001. Since then, nearly all primary care professionals and medical school faculty in the capital have undergone training at the center and new education topics are constantly being added to the program.

The Family Medicine Training Center has six instructors, including three nurses. All of them were trained in North Dakota and received on-going instruction at numerous family medicine workshops and conferences conducted by AIHA. Primarily, the center works with former general practitioners and pediatricians who, after training, return to their medical institutions ready to provide a broad range of healthcare services to people of all backgrounds.

“Our center has the latest equipment, all kinds of mannequins, and visual training aids that help us show our students the changes that occur in the body with different diseases and how to detect them during clinical examinations,” says Aina Klychduryyeva, director of the center. “Development of practical skills is the most important aspect of training for healthcare professionals. All of our courses devote 70 percent of training time on the acquisition of hands-on clinical skills, which is a unique approach in Turkmenistan.”

The standard training course at the center lasts four weeks with one-week training modules covering otolaryngology, ophthalmology, cardiovascular diseases, and women's and children's health, Klychduryyeva explains, noting that the facility has been equipped with special classrooms for each of these topic areas. She is quick to point out that the instructional approach is very rigorous—and very effective. “On average, our students experience a 30 percent increase in their



An instructor at the Scientific Center of Physiology Family Medicine Training Center demonstrates birthing techniques to a group of practitioners from Turkmenistan's outlying regions.

AIHA Success Stories



Patients take part in prenatal classes to learn more about maintaining a healthy pregnancy and the realities of labor, delivery, and newborn care.

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knowledge by the end of the course, but that is not the end of our contact with them. We're equipped with computers, Internet access, and many audiovisual aids, so they routinely come back to us for any medical information they might need. Other health-care institutions in our country don't have this capacity,” Klychdurdyeva says.

Another unique aspect of the center is its team approach to care. The concept—which trains physician-nurse teams who work together to provide care—was new to the region and initially met with resistance. It didn't take long, though, for everyone involved to recognize the value of this methodology and start to adopt it into their systems. Now doctors and nurses study the same topics together in the same groups.

“As a result, nurses understand what the doctors are doing, so they can speak the same language,” explains Maya Saryyeva, a nurse-instructor for cardiovascular diseases. According to Saryyeva, the training is designed to enable doctors and nurses to complement one another in their daily work, with the nurse's role focusing primarily on disease prevention.

“We provide a lot of information on proper nutrition for diabetics and preventive measures against asthma, hypertension, and other cardiovascular diseases,” Saryyeva continues. “It all looks simple, but we have found that most patients don't know these little things

that can keep them healthy. The family doctors and nurses we train go on to spread this knowledge to the population, which promotes the timely detection of diseases and prevention of more serious conditions.”

During training, women's health issues are studied in detail with an emphasis on detecting common pathologies, such as breast cancer and cervical cancer, as well as the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections. In clinical training exercises, physicians practice taking smears for analysis, learn about laboratory diagnostics, and receive hands-on instruction on the use of microscopes and other medical equipment. Everything the center does is rooted in the belief that a family doctor should be the first to know about a patient's problems and how to treat them. Training courses are designed to impart the knowledge and skills these practitioners need to be able to provide quality primary care services to any member of the family, including newborns, children, and adults of all ages.

Although Kulrakhan Rakhmanova, a general practitioner at Ashgabat Health House No. 9, has 30 years of professional experience, she readily admits that the continuing education course she took at the Family Medicine Training Center was better than all of the previous courses she had taken.

“Never before did we receive so much practical knowledge,” Rakhmanova says.

“The lessons here were aimed at developing our skills. We watched educational films and practiced various procedures on mannequins. We were also delighted with the teachers—both their kind attitude and the teaching methods they used. It was easy for us to learn, to share experiences, and to solve the case studies.”

Rakhmanova is one of approximately 1,000 healthcare professionals and medical school instructors from Ashgabat who have earned diplomas from the center. Among them is a team of instructors for a second Family Medicine Training Center, which opened in December 2005 at Scientific Center of Physiology with AIHA's support.

“We'd never seen a training center with such state-of-the-art resources,” says Guljahan Annamamedova, director of the second center. “Moreover, we never attended such comprehensive, hands-on training sessions as we did at Health House No. 1.” The new center—which was established to train physicians and nurses from five regions spanning Turkmenistan, as well as nurse practitioners from rural areas—now possesses similar modern educational and audiovisual equipment, as well as a fully equipped Learning Resource Center and a library.

“Just as we had been when we first visited the center at Health House No. 1, our trainees are pleasantly surprised by the possibility of accessing such a wide range of educational resources in one place. It is also really rewarding for us to see how satisfied they are with the job we do as trainers,” Annamamedova says. Explaining that she and the staff are currently brainstorming more ideas for taking her center's training programs to the next level, she concludes, “Now that our initial plan to open this center has been successfully met, we all know that the most important thing is to be true to our own beliefs and aspirations. We're really grateful to the American people for providing us with the chance to do it.”



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