

a world of difference for

WOMEN'S HEALTH

For women in many countries of the world, good health care is hard to find. But in the New Independent States (NIS) of the former Soviet Union and communities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), twenty Women's Wellness Centers (WWCs) created over the last five years are making a difference. The centers are the result of combined efforts of the American International Health Alliance (AIHA), the U.S. Agency for International Development, NIS and CEE hospitals and medical institutes, and their U.S. partners.

The AIHA goal for each center is to provide a client-oriented approach to meeting women's health needs from adolescence to postmenopause through a combination of health promotion, education, early diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up care. The effort is expected to have a trickle-down benefit on the health of other population segments, especially children.

In June 2001, Fran Jaeger, DrPH, MPH, an SPH alumna and UIC's perinatal network administrator, was selected by AIHA to evaluate the WWCs. Her evaluation team is a cross-section of UIC collaborators and includes Stacie Geller, PhD, assistant professor in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology and an adjunct faculty member at the School of Public Health, and Ashlesha Patel, MD, a fellow in women's health and a second-year MPH student. Together with Louise Simonson, MSN, RNC, WHCNP, outreach coordinator of UIC's Perinatal Center, and an advanced practice nurse, the team visited centers in L'viv and Odessa, Ukraine, Chisinau, Moldova, and Iasi, Romania in July. During a second trip, Cheryl Moran, PhD, CNM, a UIC midwife, will accompany Jaeger and Patel to St. Petersburg, Dubna, and Moscow in Russia, then Almaty, Kazakhstan and Yerevan, Armenia.

The evaluations will assess the overall impact of WWCs, which represent a key strategy of AIHA's Women's Health Initiative. Team members will tour centers, meet their staffs, talk to patients and gauge satisfaction, and

identify the accomplishments and challenges of each center. Evaluations are also viewed as a means to promote quality improvement.

At each center Jaeger and her team will be looking for common denominators and asking key questions: What have all the centers been able to do? What have some not been able to do and why? What factors contribute to some centers being able to do more than others? What lessons can be learned so that future initiatives will have even greater success?

"We want to provide positive and constructive feedback and help AIHA set the agenda for continuing its Women's Health Initiative," Jaeger says.

These overseas trips are among a series undertaken by Jaeger during her career at UIC. Jaeger received her MPH in 1975 and her DrPH in 1985, and she says it was the School of Public Health that first stimulated her interest in international activities. But the international segment of her career did not begin until after she returned to UIC as perinatal network administrator.

In 1992, Jaeger traveled to Poland and Lithuania with UIC's director of neonatology, Dr. Dharmapuri Vidyasagar, to present principles related to regionalization of perinatal services and infant mortality reduction strategies. In later years, she traveled to Uzbekistan with similar objectives. In 1995, she became the UIC coordinator for the Partnership Program between UIC's Medical Center and Second Tashkent State Medical Institute. This partnership is one of more than eighty organized by AIHA involving health care professionals and educators in twenty-one countries.

Jaeger traveled to Uzbekistan several times and, together with Tashkent faculty and staff, planned a Women's Wellness Center. Seven physicians and nurses from the institute also visited UIC, touring its campus women's health center and other university sites serving women,

including Mile Square Health Center and a center in Rockford. The first WWC in Tashkent opened in late 1997, with a satellite center following in April 2000.

“The partners from UIC serve as role models for those in other countries,” says Bernice Bennett, senior program officer at AIHA. “They bring enthusiasm, commitment, and skills. In return, they learn how people in those countries have managed to do their best with limited resources.”

With U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funds, UIC and other U.S. partners sent equipment and supplies to WWCs to help them get started. When Jaeger returned to Tashkent in September 2000, she found some of the equipment sitting unused. Despite the WWC’s commitment to implement screening standards comparable to those in the U.S., Jaeger realized that policy changes and countrywide action would be necessary before the problems impeding screening could be solved.

For instance, Jaeger originally assumed that WWCs would offer patients a Pap test as part of their cancer screening services. When visiting Tashkent she noted that while center personnel were eager to do Pap tests, they

lacked access to an adequate laboratory and personnel trained to read them.

Gradually, she discovered that offering such a test is complicated by the lack of adequate backup services, as is also the case for creating the capability to offer mammograms. While some WWCs provide both forms of cancer screening, some have to rely on simpler technology to improve early detection. Campaigns to promote breast self-exams, for example, have become common among the WWCs.

Jaeger calls the task of creating and maintaining the WWCs a learning process for both sides.

“The Tashkent center’s staff were committed to doing things the way we suggested, but there were problems stemming from their environments—problems beyond their immediate control,” Jaeger says. “As you have more and more interaction with a center, you realize that not everything you thought feasible really is. Often, the WWCs have had to depend less on machines and more on personal touch and caring—and that can be good because these are the important ingredients.”

By Janice Rosenberg

Ashlesha Patel, MD, Fran Jaeger, DrPH, MPH, Louise Simonson, MSN, RNC, WHCNP (third from left), and Stacie Geller, PhD (right), with directors of the Odessa Women’s Wellness Center in the center’s health education room



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