



USAID/Kosovo Newsletter

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Keeping Kosovo Healthy

Many citizens in the United States and developed Western countries take for granted the opportunities that local health care provides them. They have access to screening, diagnosis, and treatment for diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, STDs, etc. Often they also have doctors and nurses that they can rely on regularly for problems and questions regarding their health; physicians they trust to not only cure illness, but to provide advice on healthy lifestyles and prevention and take a personal interest in their lives, health and happiness.

USAID, through its health initiatives, has supported HIV/AIDS prevention and the improvement of quality and accessibility to primary and secondary healthcare for Kosovar citizens. Through these efforts medical care in Kosovo is being revitalized.

STRIKING AGAINST HIV/AIDS

Through its HIV/AIDS Prevention Project, USAID is helping Kosovo in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Despite a total of only 45 known cases of infection, Kosovo remains threatened by HIV. With rapid social change over the last four years, a very large youth population, and an increase in intravenous drug use and commercial sex, there are considerable risk factors that could contribute to the spread of HIV.

The Kosovo government and international community have been extremely proactive. In 2002, the Ministry of Health established an HIV/AIDS office, which will soon be represented by an HIV/AIDS officer. "Kosovo has taken many progressive steps to counteract the spread of HIV. This is unique for Southeast Europe," says Dr. Xhevat Jakupi, the former chair of the Kosovo AIDS committee.

With support from the HIV/AIDS Prevention Project, funded through the USAID Kosovo Assistance Program and implemented by Population Services International (PSI), Kosovo has developed a five-year Strategic Plan for HIV/AIDS, opened three Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) Centers, and implemented an 8-month mass media campaign targeting youth as well as pilot outreach programs with groups at high risk of contracting AIDS.

The approval of the 2004-2008 HIV/AIDS Strategic Plan for Kosovo will establish the tools needed to offset the disease. The Strategic Plan is the culmination of more than a year's efforts by more than 60 Kosovo professionals, with the assistance of several international HIV/AIDS experts funded by USAID, the European Agency for Reconstruction (EAR), and the World Health Organization (WHO). The plan focuses on three areas of action: 1) Promotion of healthy behavior among youth, the general population, and subpopulations at risk; 2) Surveillance; and

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Informational brochures and pamphlets such as these are being used to educate and inform Kosovars about HIV/AIDS and other health issues .

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Striking Against HIV/AIDS

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3) Testing, treatment, and support.

PSI in collaboration with the Kosovo AIDS Committee (KAC) has also produced a high profile media campaign focusing on HIV/AIDS prevention. The campaign appeals to youth aged 15 to 25, and identifies with the slogan "Defense is the best attack against HIV/AIDS". The campaign aims to increase personal risk perceptions of HIV and how to protect oneself. It includes television, radio, billboards, interpersonal outreach, and print materials. The campaign is estimated to have reached over 100,000 youth and a considerable segment of the general population.

Over the last year, the USAID project has provided extensive technical support to open three Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) public and private centers for HIV/AIDS that offer confidential services. These sites are the first of their kind in Kosovo. Since opening this spring, more than 150 people have received confidential counseling and testing services at the sites.

On Monday December 1st Kosovo celebrated World AIDS Awareness Day. Three Ministers signed a declaration of agreement to the HIV/AIDS strategy for Kosovo.



Kosovo Ministers sign the Declaration. (from left to right) Min. Resmije Mumcu - Health; Min. Behxhet Brajshori - Youth, Culture; and Sports; Min. Rexhep Osmani - Education

Speaking at the signing ceremony, Dale Pfeiffer, USAID Mission Director said - "All the dreams you have - all the work Kosovo has done to develop and grow economically - everything - can be destroyed in a decade if this disease takes hold. With the signing of the agreement on the Strategic Plan for the prevention of HIV/AIDS, Kosovo is demonstrating that you are not ignoring nor denying the threat of AIDS."

Other HIV/AIDS activities include a Behavior Change Communication workshop; a pilot research project with injecting drug users; ethnographic research with gay and bisexual men; and the recent attendance of two infectious disease physicians at a two-week anti-retroviral therapy treatment and care training program in the United States. ☘

PARTNERSHIPS IN HEALTH

Nurses and doctors in parts of Kosovo are no longer surprised when they run into patients on the street who seek health advice upon seeing the familiar face of their health care professional. This is one of the positive changes resulting from the programs managed by the American International Health Alliance (AIHA) in Kosovo.

With USAID support, two key AIHA partnerships have developed programs to improve the quality of both primary and secondary health care offered to Kosovar citizens. Through a grant to Dartmouth Medical School in Hanover, New Hampshire cooperation was established with the Gjilan/Gnjilane Family Health Center to improve family-based healthcare throughout the municipality. Additionally, a project through Doctors of the World (DOW) addressed a long time void in maternal care and women's health services throughout Kosovo, establishing Women's Wellness Centers (WWC) in Prizren and Gjilan/Gnjilane.

"The AIHA partnership approach is a community-based collaborative effort," explains John Capati, regional director for AIHA. "Partners conducted community assessments and then determined the greatest needs."

In Gjilan/Gnjilane, assessments indicated that one of the greatest health issues was cardiovascular disease or hypertension resulting from high blood pressure. A systematic hypertension screening program was subsequently put in place at the Main Family Health Center as well as at affiliated smaller clinics throughout Gjilan/Gnjilane Municipality. For the DOW project, needs assessments indicated that Prizren and Gjilan/Gnjilane were two city hospitals that could benefit the most from improved women's health services, evidenced by the high infant mortality rates and lack of such existing services.

Institutional and professional exchanges helped establish 'twinning' partnerships, and established close affiliation between Kosovar and US-based institutions. In the case of the DOW project, a consultant from Tirana, Albania brought experience gained from a twinning partnership with Providence, Rhode Island to help establish the WWC in Gjilan/Gnjilane and Prizren. In addition, professional exchanges of Kosovo medical professionals at affiliated US institutions gave them the skills to train colleagues.

"The nurses can do many things now that only the doctors did before," says Dr. Hajriz Ibrahim, Director of the Main Family Health House in Gjilan/Gnjilane speaking about the training courses he conducted.

Finally, a rigorous community-driven approach has allowed local medical staff to take the lead in establishing objectives. DOW and Dartmouth staff worked with local partners to adopt strategic plans with clear and realistic objectives, thus helping to ensure the sustainability of both the WWCs and the Gjilan/Gnjilane primary health care program.

Now, women have greater access to maternal healthcare, gynecological services and other female primary and secondary health services. And Gjilan/Gnjilane citizens now have a wider array of family services and primary health care that provides close personal attention to each patient, and coordinates with satellite clinics. It is hoped that the lessons and the expertise that have been learned and shared through these projects will aid in the future development of healthcare across Kosovo. ☘



Medical professionals in Kosovo have broadened skills with training seminars such as these provided by AIHA partners.

PUTTING MINDS AT EASE

Tucked away in the rear of the Infectious Disease Clinic of the University of Prishtina is a bright and inviting set of adjoining rooms. It is a quiet location where one might go to read a paper or have a confidential chat with a close friend. The space serves as a testing center for HIV, one of three Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) centers that has been established by Populations Services International (PSI) with funding from USAID. Clients seeking the center's services may show up unannounced through a back door to receive free counseling and testing.



Lab technician Fatmir Gashi (left) and Dr. Izet Sadiku (right) work together in the Pristina VCT clinic.

"Before the war the discussion of HIV and AIDS was taboo, and most Kosovars didn't have access to information about it," explains the center coordinator and counselor Dr. Izet Sadiku. "But today people are much more open about the issue."

Often people who come to use the clinics' services are not involved in risk-taking behavior that would put them at greater danger of contracting HIV. They mostly just want accurate information and to clear their minds - a sign that Kosovars are taking the threat of HIV seriously. Offering anonymous, rapid HIV testing, and pre- and post-counseling services, the clinic serves everyone from teenagers and married couples to commercial sex workers.

The threat of HIV is real. Risk factors have greatly increased since the war, making Kosovo vulnerable to wider HIV infection. In addition, available treatment is virtually non-existent. These realities have subsequently driven the development of a five-year HIV/AIDS prevention strategy, the implementation of which specialists and politicians alike hope will result in greater education about and treatment for HIV.

But for now Dr. Sadiku gets great satisfaction from being able to put his clients at ease, and to help them realize that if they are responsible and safe, then they are at minimal risk of becoming infected. "Some clients have found no need to get tested after pre-test counseling," reports Sadiku speaking about some of the misconceptions people have about the disease.

Without a doubt HIV/AIDS is a frightening reality, but with commitment and foresight Kosovars can change the concept that HIV/AIDS is a shameful disease, and approach it as a public issue that must be discussed and understood so that it can be kept at bay. ☘



The PSI HIV/AIDS campaign logo (left) and VCT clinic logo (right)

HEALTHY AND HAPPY IN GJILAN/GNJILANE

Three years ago when patients entered the Gjilan/Gnjilane Health House in eastern Kosovo they were faced with a confusing array of doctors' offices, unorganized patient referral and admittance systems, and inefficient clinical services. Now Health House visitors are greeted by attentive administrative and nursing staff who accurately document visits and health status and ensure a smooth process for patients. While waiting for their appointment, patients browse through brochures developed by the Health Center's education department on various health topics. The result: holistic medical attention and care.

In October 2001 Dartmouth Medical School in Hanover, New Hampshire through a partnership with the American International Health Alliance embarked on a three-year USAID-funded project to help Gjilan/Gnjilane municipality reform its health care systems and facilities and establish a competent system of family-based primary health care for Gjilan/Gnjilane citizens. Working intensively with the Main Family Medicine Center in Gjilan/Gnjilane, they created a screening program for high blood pressure, established better patient flow and management, provided intensive training for doctors and nurses, and increased patient education. Patients now have the security of knowing that they will each be given the individual attention they need from doctors and nurses.

During the Dartmouth program, nurses and doctors have come to rely on each other as partners and colleagues. "There has been good cooperation between doctor and nurses. We are working as a team now," says Nurse Ramize Ahmeti-Ibrahimi, Head Nurse and manager of the education department. "The respect and communication between doctors and nurses has increased a lot."

She, as well as other nurses and doctors, participated in intensive train-the-trainer courses, and went to the United States on partnership exchanges. They taught topics such as communication, ethics, hygiene and patient education to fellow nurses and doctors at their center as well as staff of smaller health care branches throughout Gjilan/Gnjilane municipality. "It's nice to be an example for the others," says Ahmeti-Ibrahimi about the training and education she has helped provide.

Doctors Jashar Ramandani and Ismet Uruqi enthusiastically recalled exchanges where they could learn and take examples from American medical facilities. "We surprised ourselves. We switched on completely - seeing micro-systems and how health-care worked in the States," says Dr. Uruqi. These exchanges helped provide the energy to make changes at the Gjilan/Gnjilane Health Center.

The Center now relies heavily on the competence and diligence of its nurses. They represent the first level of care for patients - interviewing, recording concerns or problems, screening for chronic illness such as high blood pressure, and giving advice. "Patients know that they can come back and meet with me," says Nurse Ahmeti-Ibrahimi who enjoys the personal relationship that she now has with her patients - something she didn't have before.

"I never believed that we could have these kinds of changes here. I never believed in my 23 years that this could happen," exclaims Nurse Safete Neziri, Head of Family Medicine Services. "The work is more effective and the patients are happy."

The changes are welcomed by the citizens of Gjilan/Gnjilane municipality as they bring their families to the Health House for primary health care. And if they have any concerns or suggestions they can drop a note in the suggestion box on the way out the front door! ☘

Kosovar Communities Work with Disabled Children

In 2003, USAID and other donors through Doctors of the World helped to lay the foundation for sustainable community-based services for disabled children and their families in the cities of Shtime/Stimlje and Gracanica. Two residential homes run by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare are now providing disabled children an alternative to institutionalization. Children are living comfortably in safe and warm conditions, and receiving appropriate rehabilitation services and most importantly - love and care.

In addition, disabled children in these areas can now join community activities and be integrated into local Special Education classes. Activities include after school tutoring, parent support groups, as well as the design of individual rehabilitation plans that can be implemented by parents at home. With USAID assistance these children now have support that they can count on during the cold winter months and throughout the year.



**Wishing you
Happy and Healthy Holidays
and a
Joyful New Year!**

**~ Seasons greetings
to all of our colleagues and partners
around the world ~**

**May the year 2004
bring success to each of our endeavors
as we work together
to provide a better future for all.**