

## Visit to Armenian hospital opens door to pediatric partnership

In the Armenian capital, Yerevan, staff at Muratsan Hospital Complex are creating the country's first psychosocial services program for pediatric cancer patients and their families. Earlier this year, they welcomed some new associates in that effort: experts from Dana-Farber/Boston Children's Cancer and Blood Disorders Center.

In May, a team of Dana-Farber/Boston Children's faculty, including a social worker and psychologist, spent a week at the Muratsan pediatric cancer clinic to observe care practices, meet with hospital staff and government health ministers, and discuss ways to improve care delivery. The trip, organized by the Global Health Initiative (GHI) of Dana-Farber/Boston Children's, is part of a nascent partnership that is forging alliances between faculty and staff at the two cancer centers.

The collaboration grew out of an informal conversation last fall. Gevorg Tamamyan, MD, MSc, a pediatric hematologist/oncologist at Muratsan Hospital, was participating in the GHI's GLOBE Scholar program, which brings pediatricians from developing countries to Dana-Farber/Boston Children's to observe clinical activities and participate in teaching conferences and research projects. He spoke with Jorge Fernandez, LICSW, and Brian Delaney, PsyD, of Pediatric Psychosocial Services, about his hospital's plans for a psychosocial services program and about GHI's work in helping establish such programs in low- and middle-income countries. Within weeks, Tamamyan and his newfound American colleagues were holding biweekly teleconferences and exchanging emails as the psychosocial services program at Muratsan took shape.

When Fernandez and Delaney – along with Irini Albanti, MPH, MA, director of the GHI; Leslie Lehmann, MD, GHI medical/faculty director; and Kathleen Houlahan, RN, MSN – arrived at Muratsan, they were impressed by how much had been accomplished. “We learned how ready they were for a more structured program,” Fernandez relates. “They hired two half-time psychologists and set up a playroom. They recognized the need for kids to be engaged in play and other activities to ameliorate the challenges they and their families face.”

One of the biggest challenges to establishing a psychosocial services program is a pervasive cultural resistance to seek help from a psychosocial provider. “Those who consult a mental health professional are often



(Left to right) Gevorg Tamamyan, Irini Albanti, Leslie Lehmann, Jorge Fernandez, Brian Delaney, and Kathy Houlahan collaborated to develop a psychosocial services program for pediatric patients in Armenia.

stigmatized,” Albanti explains. “In their presentations, therefore, Brian and Jorge focused on the staff's existing strengths and approaches that children and families would readily see as helpful.”

The visitors were struck by differences in the way Armenian physicians communicate with patients and the type of information they share. In contrast to the United States, where it's accepted that patients be informed about the nature of their disease in order to consent to treatment, Armenian physicians tend to disclose that information to the patient's family rather than the patient.

“In the U.S., one of our primary responsibilities is to explain to pediatric patients, in an age-appropriate way, their diagnosis, the treatment they'll receive, and their prognosis,” Delaney remarks. “By fostering that kind of communication, the family can share the experience with the patient and support one another. In Armenia, the stance is that by not speaking about or sharing the diagnosis with patients, physicians can protect them from pain.”

Delaney and Fernandez kept these sensitivities in mind when discussing American practices. “Talking about our experiences helped introduce a different way of thinking about these issues,

and a chance to open a dialogue about them,” Delaney says. He added that Armenian doctors’ reluctance to impart a cancer diagnosis to patients is understandable in a country with one of the highest rates of cancer death in the world.

The American visitors were impressed by the warmth and openness of the people they met, and of the dedication of Armenian clinicians who work hard, under challenging conditions, for relatively low pay. “We found a great deal of cohesiveness and mutual support among people, a strong sense of perseverance in the face of adversity that isn’t rooted only in nationalism,” Fernandez comments. “It’s a kind of pride in their culture and history.”

The psychosocial program was funded mainly by the GHI team’s participation in last year’s Boston Marathon® Jimmy Fund Walk presented by Hyundai, and by the City of Smile Foundation. In November, clinicians and a nurse from Muratsan will pay a return visit to Dana-Farber/Boston Children’s as GLOBE Scholars and GHI international visitors, with members of the area’s Armenian community volunteering to provide lodging at their homes. [RL](#)