

Palliative Care in Croatia

Croatia has undergone a great transition over the last 15 years – from part of the federal Yugoslavia and communism to an independent country, struggling for its existence. Palliative care services are only now starting to develop, although there has been a dream of palliative care for many years. Anica Jušić, a retired professor of neurology, has continuously fought for the development of Croatian palliative care and in 1994 when the homeland war was at its critical point she founded, with a small group of enthusiastic collaborators, the Croatian Society of Hospice/Palliative Care.

The development of palliative care services came to fruition in 2000 when an interdisciplinary voluntary hospice home care team started to provide home care support, both nursing and medical, to dying people and their families. In 2002 palliative care was supported by the Ministry of Health and the City of Zagreb Health Office when the Regional Hospice Centre was established, providing a centre for the hospice home care team, administrative offices and counselling and educational facilities.

International collaboration

The Croatian hospice movement development has been supported all the time from established hospices and individuals from England, USA, Canada, Germany, Holland, Poland, Hungary and other countries - with lecturers at symposia, conferences, courses, Several palliative care leaflets and books have been translated into the Croatian language

Education in palliative care

The latest initiative to develop education has been in collaboration with the Kent Institute of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of Kent at Canterbury. In June 2001, a multidisciplinary group of tutors from Kent led a course for 14 health and social care professionals on Symptom Management, Psychosocial Care and Bereavement. There were many opportunities for discussion and participation, and the course encouraged an

interactive approach to teaching. A further course was held in May 2002, for a similar group of committed Croatian professionals, who are involved in the developing palliative care services in Zagreb and other parts of Croatia. The aim was to enable these individuals to undertake further teaching and education throughout Croatia.

Further collaboration is now planned to extend and include the education of medical students in Zagreb. It is hoped to develop in the final year a module on “End of Life Care”. The module is being designed collaboratively, and initially the tutors will be primarily from KIMHS, but with the aim of increasing the Croatian involvement within a three year development period. After this time the KIMHS input may be in the supervision and support of the course, as the main teaching will be from Croatian teachers. This exciting development will be a challenge for all involved.

Government involvement

The international collaboration in palliative care has been supported in 2002, when the Minister of Health of Croatia, Dr Andro Vlahusic, encouraged the formation of a Palliative Care Committee of Ministry of Health. He nominated, on the suggestion of Kathleen Foley, ten foreign experts in palliative care as consultants. The Group met for the first time in Zagreb on 22nd March, when Anica Jušić was elected president. There are representatives from within organizations in Croatia and from the international community. It is the first occasion that such a Ministerial committee has included people from outside Croatia and shows the importance that the Minister gives to international collaboration in the development of palliative care in Croatia.

The Committee is now looking at its priorities, in particular:

- The inclusion of palliative care within the new health reforms and in the new health protection law
- The production of a national programme on palliative care
- Education in palliative care for
 - Medical students

- Other health and social care students
- Postgraduate medical education
- Further education of professionals within the developing palliative care services.

The future

Palliative care is in its infancy in Croatia but it is now developing quickly. The collaboration with other institutions in the USA, UK and Europe aims to help in this development. It is essential that the systems that develop in Croatia remain sensitive to the local needs and culture, as Croatia needs to develop palliative care appropriately for its own people. It is hoped that the international collaboration will aid this move to develop within Croatia palliative care of the highest quality.

This is based on an article submitted to the European Journal of Palliative Care by David Oliver ¹, Anica Jusic ², Fliss Murtagh ¹, Ana Stambuk ² and Desa Grubic-Jakupcevic ²

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