



In this new section, European palliative care organisations are invited to explain their goals, express their hopes and voice their concerns

## **HSPSCCNCP: foster palliative care and pain management in Greece**

Since 1997, the Hellenic Society of Palliative and Symptomatic Care of Cancer and Non Cancer Patients (HSPSCCNCP) has actively promoted palliative care and pain management in Greece. Athina Vadalouca, Eriphyli Argyras and Ioanna Siafaka recount its successes and consider what still needs to be done



**Athina Vadalouca, President, HSPSCCNCP**

Twelve years ago, palliative care in Greece was more a vague notion than an essential service integrated into medical practice. Only a few hospitals provided pain management and palliative care services. These services were all run on a voluntary basis and relied on the efforts of anaesthesiologists and a few other healthcare professionals. Then, in 1997, the Hellenic Society of Palliative and Symptomatic Care of Cancer and Non Cancer Patients (HSPSCCNCP) was founded by healthcare professionals working with terminally ill patients or people living with chronic pain.<sup>1</sup>

The main objective of this non-profit society was, and remains, to improve the quality of life of patients suffering from cancer, AIDS, brain injuries and cerebral strokes, and to achieve a better standard of living for elderly people and people living with chronic pain.

The HSPSCCNCP's main goals are to create and organise pain management services and hospices, to formulate and improve Greek legislation on palliative care, to set up home care teams, to establish pain management and palliative care as medical specialties, to educate and train healthcare professionals throughout the country, and to promote research into new drugs and new pain management techniques.

Since its foundation, the HSPSCCNCP has made great efforts to promote palliative care and pain management, with significant success. Today, it has more than 380 members, mostly health- and social care professionals working in various fields – including doctors from different specialties, nurses, social workers, psychologists and physical therapists.

It co-operates closely with organisations pursuing similar goals, such as the European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC – of which the HSPSCCNCP is a collective member), the Eastern and Central Europe Palliative Care Task Force, the World Institute of Pain, the World Society of Pain Clinicians, the Hellenic Society of Algology and the Hellenic Cancer Society. It also participates in local and international committees, as well as volunteer organisations such as Child's Smile.

### **Actively promoting palliative care**

Over the years, the HSPSCCNCP has been involved in many activities to promote palliative care, and raise public and professional awareness of the need for comprehensive and effective care management of patients at the end of life and of patients with debilitating pain.



The HSPSCCNCP organises many different types of meetings and events, including social events such as this theatrical performance

In December 1998, the HSPSCCNCP and the Hellenic Pain Society held the first Panhellenic Congress of Pain Therapy and Palliative Care, with international participation and two foreign speakers. The congress was a success: more than 400 participants attended and 80 new applications for membership were made.

The HSPSCCNCP has since organised many congresses, lectures, public debates, meetings and seminars throughout Greece, to spread knowledge and awareness of palliative care. The Society has also participated in organising many international congresses on palliative care and pain management.

In 1999, a book on palliative care, *Symptomatic and palliative care for terminally ill patients*, was published by Athina Vadalouca, President of the HSPSCCNCP. This book is now used at the University of Athens Medical School, as part of an elective course on 'palliative care and pain management'.

In 1994, this course was included in the medical curriculum, in an effort to educate doctors and promote the development of palliative care in Greece. The number of students attending it is constantly increasing. The first year of the course, there were 30 students; now, there are around 300 every year.

In October 2000, 43 participants attended the first workshop on Palliative and Symptomatic Care to be conducted in the English language in Greece. It was held in Athens and organised by the HSPSCCNCP. This two-day event proved to be a resounding success. There was an enormous interest in the workshops, which were given by renowned national and international speakers. Since then, the seminar has taken place every year.

The HSPSCCNCP has organised media presentations – on radio, on television and in the press – and a number of social events. It has managed to communicate to the Greek authorities the issues that need to be resolved. Following an HSPSCCNCP initiative, discussions on palliative care are taking place in parliament. A regulatory framework for palliative and home care has been prepared by the government in co-operation with the Society.

The HSPSCCNCP has translated into Greek, and published, the official EAPC position on euthanasia, *Euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide: a view from an EAPC Ethics Task Force*.<sup>2</sup>

The last meeting organised by the HSPSCCNCP, the 10th Scientific Meeting on Regional Anaesthesia, Pain Management and Palliative Care, held in November 2008, had international participation and was attended by important

figures from the European medical community, including Professor Lukas Radbruch, President of the EAPC, Professor Giustino Varrassi, President of the European Federation of IASP Chapters, and Professor Slobodan Gligorijevic, past President of the European Society of Regional Anaesthesia and Pain Therapy (ESRA). Following that meeting, the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Cyprus decided to create his country's first pain and palliative care service, within the oncology department at Nicosia General Hospital.

## A new outlook

The HSPSCCNCP's work and its co-operation with other organisations has led to a new outlook for palliative care in Greece. What, a decade ago, was only a concept, is now a reality. Today, about 45 hospitals across Greece have consultant teams on palliative care and pain management; there are nine home care units, three day-care centres and five bereavement support teams (three for adults and two for children).<sup>3-5</sup>

Since its inception in 1987, the HSPSCCNCP has continuously lobbied the Greek Ministry of Health, in an effort to improve pain relief and palliative care in the country. This paid off when, in November 2005, a new law was passed, which, for the first time, obliged Greek physicians to alleviate pain and improve the quality of life of terminally ill patients through palliative care.

## Challenges ahead

Palliative care in Greece has made important advances, but there are still many problems to address and many things to do.

- As yet, there is still no comprehensive national palliative care plan. Although guidelines for hospices have been established by the government, there are still no organised hospices capable of providing full palliative care to patients in need. Furthermore, the government clearly stated that no government funding would be forthcoming.
- About 40 pain centres exist in public and university hospitals, and there are a few in private hospitals and clinics. However, many hospitals still lack pain and palliative care centres. Currently, palliative care is based on the voluntary input from anaesthesiologists, nurses, psychologists and other healthcare professionals. The government recently officially included pain and palliative care centres as an

organic part of public hospitals (until then, such centres had not been given official recognition), but it was made clear that steps would be taken slowly and gradually.

- Home care programmes remain the weakest area of Greek palliative care. A limited number of programmes exist, mainly on a voluntary basis; home care teams lack basic tools and funds.
- The prescription of opioids is beset with a number of regulatory problems, although the situation has improved markedly, mainly because of the actions of the HSPSCCNCP, other similar organisations and a few academics.
- Pain management and palliative care are not recognised as official medical specialties. Neither the government nor the universities have any immediate plans to change this.

## More comprehensive care

Much needs to be done to further improve the quality of palliative care and pain management in Greece. Funds are lacking. The healthcare system faces serious economic problems and the cost of providing quality palliative care overwhelms healthcare authorities. Studies are under way that will hopefully prove that quality palliative care is cost-effective (we have already seen data regarding hospices in the NHS showing that palliative care is, indeed, cost-effective). The number of volunteers is growing and the progress already made is encouraging for all those who work in palliative care.

The HSPSCCNCP works hard to ensure that palliative care becomes more comprehensive. Much co-operation and many combined efforts will be needed.

### References

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