

# SightFirst Saves Sight in Eastern Europe

by Allie Stryker

When communism fell in Eastern Europe and Russia, health care systems were thrown into turmoil. Training eye care specialists became problematic. Lions and SightFirst stepped into the breach.

Tucked into a corner on the campus of Vinohrady Teaching Hospital Eye Department at Charles University in Prague, the Lions Ophthalmology Educational Center (LOEC) has introduced ophthalmologists to a public health care approach for eye care in Central and Eastern Europe as well as in the former Soviet Union.

The LOEC was constructed and equipped through a SightFirst grant awarded to local Lions in 1998.

Ophthalmologists attend teaching programs at the LOEC that address causes of avoidable visual impairment and blindness. Since 2002, 1,120 ophthalmologists from 20 countries have been trained by leading eye care specialists, who often volunteer their time.

“The Lions Center is a shining example of a successful continued collaboration of local Lions and the

Vinohrady Teaching Hospital Eye Department,” says Dr. Ivo Kocur of the World Health Organization. “There have been a number of dedicated people engaged in developing this institute. The outcome of this collaboration has been one of the most impressive examples of the Lions’ contribution to the communities in the European region.”

A program of Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF), SightFirst works to save sight and prevent blindness. This center is a unique project for LCIF: it is only one of four stand-alone eye care training institutions constructed by SightFirst. The other three are located in Barbados, India and Paraguay. The LOEC facility also has been supported through partnership funds from Charles University and the Christoffel Blindnen Mission (CBM), a German eye care organization.

In the Republic of Moldova, low vision rehabilitation is a new field. When ophthalmologist Tatiana Ghidirimtschi had the opportunity to attend low vision courses at the LOEC, she could not pass it up.

“I am very lucky that I had this opportunity to attend these courses,” she says. “The knowledge gained is very important for my practice and, most importantly, I can better help our patients who have lost hope!”

Dr. Ghidirimtschi says that the knowledge gained through the LOEC courses improved methods of examining patients for low vision and prescribing low vision aids, as well as improving the exchange of information where she works.

“At these courses, we can meet colleagues from different parts of the world and discuss interesting topics. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Lions for their involvement with this center and giving us the chance to attend the LOEC courses,” says Dr. Ghidirimtschi. “I would recommend this center to others, and I would also like to express my gratitude for the specialists who presented us with very useful information.”

For Bosnian ophthalmologist Amra Nadarevic, visiting Prague meant following in the footsteps of Bosnian doctors who have attended classes at the LOEC. In December, she and a colleague attended a course on ocular inflammatory diseases.

“I liked the fact that during two days we could ask anything about ocular inflammatory disease,” says Dr. Nadarevic. “The experts had a lot of patience to answer all of our questions. The knowledge they give you is very precious. They talked about their experience and what really matters.”

For Dr. Nadarevic, the experience at LOEC was invaluable. “Dr. Kocur inspired me and gave me a lot to think about when I returned to Bosnia. If we have a will, we can do almost anything



**A SightFirst grant will provide students at the Lions Ophthalmology Educational Center in Prague with courses on pediatric ophthalmology, low vision and other topics.**



An ophthalmologist in Romania screens a child for visual impairment.

to prevent blindness in our country. I am very thankful for this opportunity," she says.

None of this would have been possible without Lions. Since 1996, the Prague Hartig Lions Club has been the primary collaborator with Charles University. The club helped develop the original LOEC project proposal, construct the facility and prepare the programs. Club members have also closely worked with LOEC to promote Lions clubs to the participants and give advice on possible projects. Together, they have been filling a great need.

"You must remember that the center was established in an era in European history when political transition was taking place in the countries of Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union," says Dr. R. Pararajasegaram, a former consulting ophthalmologist with the World Health Organization and member of the SightFirst Advisory Committee. "The transition also affected medical education including ophthalmology."

Since being founded, funding for the training courses has been supplied by CBM, and students have been supported by the university or corporations. Now, SightFirst will assist the center through a grant providing courses on pediatric ophthalmology, low vision, uncorrected refractive error and diabetic eye disease. This summer, 27 students will benefit from these courses. LCIF is now working with LOEC and Lions to develop a system in which Lions from around the region are formally a part of the training process.

"The Lions Center has promoted the concept of a public health approach in eye care planning and provision," says Dr. Kocur. "It has been instrumental in addressing the major causes of avoidable visual impairment. It has created an unprecedented platform for exchanging experience and networking for the whole generation of junior eye care professionals."

Ophthalmologist Lucia Gogorova, a second year resident at the Faculty Hospital Kralovske Vinohrady in

Prague, attended three courses at the LOEC and looks forward to more. "Although I have a chance to work with really good doctors, sometimes I am not able to consult cases with them because they are very busy. On the other hand, I need to learn quickly, to make important decisions by myself," she says. "The LOEC helped me with that in a perfect way. The courses organized by the LOEC are the best opportunity to discuss, compare and improve my skills. I can communicate with other young people who have similar questions, goals and attitudes as me."

Those trained at LOEC agree that the experience is both priceless and unique. "I can say LOEC is helping me to become a good doctor and to do my best," says Dr. Gogorova. "I am grateful for that to all who participate on this and support young doctors."



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