

Wellness Center's Gavar Clinic Opens, Thanks to Donors, Principally the Chicago Armenian Community



US and Armenian guests at the Gavar Satellite Clinic opening. Seated L to R are: AACA US Advisor, Vartkess Balian; US Amb. John Ordway; Co-Founders, Hranush Hakobian and Rita Balian; USAID Armenia Mission Director, Keith Simmons and Armenian Assembly Region Director, Arpi Vartanian. Standing L to R are: USAID Mission Health Officer, Anna Gregorian; ROA Deputy Health Minister, Tatul Hakobian; AACA Board, Marie Balian; USC Cytopathologist, Dr. Camilla Cobb; Project Harmony, Armenia, Eric Nankervis; US Internist, Dr. Vicken Poochikian; US OBGYN, Dr. Emma Zargarian; US Dr. Hratch Abrahamian; USC Cytologist, Katherine Berberian; US/AIHA Armenia Coordinator, Ruzan Avetisyan; Carelift Armenia Rep., Dr. Aram Babayan

WASHINGTON, DC - This summer, the Armenian American Cultural Association (AACA), the US sponsor of the Armenian American Wellness Center (AAWC or "Wellness Center") located in Yerevan, Armenia, announced the opening of a Primary Health Care Clinic in the town of Gavar, in the Gegharkunik Marz (District) of the Lake Sevan Region, Armenia. The event was celebrated by an Opening Ceremony held at the Clinic on July 6, 2003, attended by over 250 people.

This facility serves as the Second Satellite Clinic of the Armenian American Wellness Center, and offers American-style basic primary health-care services, in addition to mammography and ultrasound screening, and basic gynecological services, including Pap smears, treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, menopausal problems, infertility and family planning services. The Gavar Clinic also offers public education regarding early detection of breast and cervical cancer and general preventive health care.

The AACA first established the Armenian American Mammography University Center in Yerevan, Armenia in 1997 as a response to the alarming increase of breast cancer cases and the critical need for accurate and early detection of the disease. The first satellite clinic was then opened in April 2000 at Yerevan's Women's Hospital,

located in the suburbs of Yerevan. As a result of the addition of Gynecology and Pathology Departments in January 2002, the Mammography Center was renamed the Armenian American Wellness Center to better reflect the range of services it provides, which are constantly growing.

Following in the footsteps of AAWC, the Gavar Clinic's mission is also *to save, prolong and improve the lives of women through early detection of breast and cervical cancer and educate the public about the importance of preventive health care.*

The Gavar Clinic project began three years ago when a small rural dwelling was purchased to house the Clinic. "Extensive renovations, using American clinical plans and standards, converted the house into a 10-room medical facility with a basement for utilities and storage use," explained

Rita Balian, President and Chief Volunteer Officer (CVO) of AACA and Founder of Wellness Center. The process of renovating the building and outfitting it with modern equipment and medical

and pharmaceutical supplies, as well as training its staff, was a collaborative effort between AACA and AAWC, with the assistance of USAID/AIHA that contributed \$8,350 for training in the U.S. and Armenia of the Clinic's Primary Health Care physician; Carelift International that shipped a 40-foot container of US supplies, equipment, tools and office furniture worth \$41,000, to the Gavar Clinic; International Relief and Development (IRD) that sent medicine, medical filing cabinets, exam tables and other necessary supplies worth over \$20,000; and the Armenian-American Chicago Diaspora Community that raised \$25,000 towards the \$75,000 cost of renovation of the Gavar Clinic.

AACA and AAWC are grateful to all of their Donors and most especially to their "Friends" in Chicago for their commitment in helping to finance this Project. In addition, many individuals from the aforementioned groups also volunteered their time and expertise to the Project. In-kind donations of time and expertise was also given by the U.S. medical professionals, who trained the Clinic's medical staff both in the U.S. and

in Armenia on several occasions, and was worth over \$15,000. The in-kind donation of volunteer hours in both the U.S. and Armenia were valued at close to \$100,000 during the past three years.

Gavar is located in the Gegharkunik Marz of Armenia on the shores of Lake Sevan, approximately 100 kilometers from Yerevan. There are approximately 270,000 people in this Marz - 35,000 of whom reside in Gavar. **The AACA chose this location for its second Satellite Clinic because monthly demographic surveys conducted among patients who traveled to the Wellness Center for screening during the past six years indicated that women in Gegharkunik Marz have higher rates of breast cancer than those living in other locales.** Other major health concerns for the population of Gavar include thyroid conditions, kidney disease, and cardiovascular problems, all ailments that can largely be managed through appropriate and healthy lifestyle choices and regular check-ups for preventive health-care.

Addressing the importance of making primary health-care and educational services accessible to the people of the Gegharkunik Marz,



US Ambassador to Armenia John Ordway at the podium sharing his appreciation of the Wellness Center in Yerevan and its new Satellite Clinic in Gavar to benefit the population of Armenia (especially of the Gegharkunik Marz) providing preventive and primary health-care services



Gavar Satellite Clinic: an old house BEFORE the renovations



Gavar Satellite Clinic: NOW - after the renovations

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which has been recently recognized as the most socially vulnerable region in Armenia, Hranush Hakobian, a member of the Armenian National Assembly and Co-President of the Wellness Center, stated, "It is a well-known fact that prevention is a weak link in Armenia's health-care system. In general, people visit a physician only after they've become very ill. There is no tradition of an annual check-up, as such, many diseases are discovered in their later stages when chances of successful treatment are diminished, and there are few, if any, community awareness programs that teach people the value of preventive health care."

In addition to providing much-needed clinical services, it is also an important mission to the staff of the Gavar Satellite Clinic to persuade people -- particularly those living in more rural settings and areas -- not to ignore health-related problems. "We want people to feel comfortable about visiting the doctor, but to accomplish this we must first change their mentality," Hakobian explains. Some of the strategies they are planning to use to meet this goal, include hosting a number of community-awareness programs such as lectures and discussions on primary and preventive health care, and distributing educational materials on disease prevention, as well as working with local media, Gavar University and schools to maximize public outreach and education.

Presenters at the Opening Program of the Gavar Clinic featured many American, Armenian and international dignitaries, including, in addition to Co-Founders Rita Balian and Hranush Hagopian, US Ambassador to Armenia John Ordway and his wife Maryjo, USAID Country Director for Armenia Keith Simmons and his wife Chris,

Deputy Minister of Health Tatul Hakobyan and his wife, and Gegharkunik Marz Governor Stepan Barseghyan and the Primate of the region Bishop Mesrob.

Other dignitaries attending the event included USAID Armenian Mission Health Officer Anna Gregorian, Arpi Vartanian of the Armenian Assembly, National Assembly Member Rafik Grigoryan, AIHA Programs Coordinator Ruzan Avetisyan, US Carelift International Armenia Representative Aram Babayan, IRD Armenia Director Mariam Sianozova, Eric Nankervis, Project Harmony Armenia, Karalampos Lumakis, Administrative Director of Armen-Tel-Armenia, and AACA Board Members.

Also attending the Opening were members of the Wellness Center's U.S. Medical Advisory Board who traveled to Armenia as part of AACA's 7th Medical Mission, including Dr. Camilla Cobb, Dean of Cytopathology Department of USC Medical Center; Dr. Vicken Poochikian, Internist, Prince George's Hospital Center in Maryland; Dr. Emma Zargarian, Obstetrician / Gynecologist, Greater Baltimore Medical Center and Johns Hopkins University and Medical Center; and Katherine Berberian, Cytologist, USC Medical Center. They also assisted with the launch of the Gavar Satellite Clinic by donating their time and expertise to train on-site the Armenian clinicians staffing the Clinic.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, many members of the local community made appointments to be seen at the Satellite Clinic during its first week of operations. Since July 6, the Clinic has seen over 230 patients.

"Bringing high-quality health-care services to the Armenian community -- including modern diagnostics to detect breast and cervical cancer at the earliest possible



Rita Balian addresses gathered guests and members of the Gavar community (over 250) who attended the Opening Ceremony. Behind her on the podium are: US Amb. & Mrs. John Ordway; Gegharkunik Marzbed, Stepan Barseghyan; MP & Co-Founder Hranush Hakobian and Dr. Vicken Poochikian

stages and community education and outreach programs that teach people to take a more active role in their own health -- has been a top priority for us from day one," notes Rita Balian. She continues, "the Wellness Center, since its opening in 1997, has organized Monthly Medical Outreach Missions to rural communities throughout Armenia which now provide free ultrasound screening, basic gynecological exams and Pap smears, and demonstrations of monthly breast self-exams, and also distribute educational pamphlets to people in remote areas. More importantly, we teach women that their health and the health of their families depend on them forming a partnership with their health-care providers. This Satellite Clinic is a natural extension of our work to expand the services of the Wellness Center throughout the rural communities of Armenia."

For more information on the Armenian American Wellness Center contact: AACA, Tel: 703-416-2555 or e-mail: usaaca@aol.com



At the Gavar Clinic: A young asthmatic patient entrusted to the care of the Primary Health Care Physician, Dr. Lusine Musoyan who just returned to Gavar from her US training in Washington, DC



At the Gavar Clinic Patient Registration Desk: a new patient providing personal documents for registration



At the Gavar Clinic: nurse checking the vital signs of a patient in preparation for her clinical exam



Resident Primary Health-Care doctor taking the blood pressure of a patient