

Reaching Rural Communities: Health Discussions Inform and Empower Romanian Families

In a local health dispensary, about 20 women have gathered. It is a large, cold building, but this room is warm and everyone feels welcome. A table covered with food stands in the middle and women of varying ages sit and chat amongst themselves. They are not sure what to expect, but they have come to this first community health seminar after learning about it from their doctor or seeing a notice about the meeting.

Suddenly the door opens: the mayor has arrived to dedicate this space as the community center for the village of Mociu, in the Cluj District of Romania. The trainer is introduced, and everyone is welcomed to try the refreshments before the program begins. Today's meeting focuses on nutrition, particularly the lack of iodine, which has led to various clinical manifestations of thyroid insufficiency (i.e. goiter) in the population of the village.

The trainer, Mrs. Dana Simu reviews some of the health issues related to iodine deficiency and the women ask questions. The conversation, however, soon turns to other nutritional concerns. Women ask questions about weight loss and diabetes. "How many eggs and how much bacon can we have in one week?" a woman asks. Mrs. Simu answers each question thoughtfully and

in ways these rural women can easily understand.



Mociu – Community Center

one-to-one counseling sessions provided by the facilitators (a local retired nurse trained in RH issues in Poieni and a family physician in Mociu), are a new and innovative approach that is proving highly effective.

Reaching Rural Communities is just one success story of the Romanian Family Health Initiative (RFHI), a bilateral USAID-funded project implemented by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. The RFHI is designed to increase the availability and utilization of high quality client-oriented services at the primary health care level and to assure sustainability of reproductive health services in Romania, including family planning, safe motherhood, early detection of breast and cervical cancer, and HIV/AIDS and STIs prevention.

Discussing Critical Health Concerns

Throughout Romania, rural communities lack access to up-to-date basic health information and the opportunity for counseling and informative discussions about health. The Romanian Family Health Initiative (RFHI) is working to increase the availability of health information and empower rural Romanians to seek the health care services they need. Such community center seminars, combined with the

Mociu is not the first village in Cluj to have a community center that focuses on health. In the village of Poieni, RFHI helped to open a community center, but quickly learned that during the week, women were not able to attend because of the distance to travel when they should be working. Meetings are now held twice a month on Sundays and religious holidays, when women and families can take a break from their work and come to town for church or celebrations.

Collaborative Efforts

The community center facilitator in Poieni also organizes community meetings in other villages. In Sanpaul, for example, **70 km** from Poieni, meetings are now held once a month. “At first, women in Sanpaul were too shy to talk about themselves,” remembers Dr. Rodica Teodoroiu, one of the RFHI Program Coordinators. “We would hold a health seminar and discuss a specific topic, such as family planning, and none of the women would say anything. Suddenly, however, they began to open up. Now women have changed—they all talk about their family planning method and number of abortions they had before they started using family planning.”

The community centers are a fully collaborative effort. The village must express its interest and provide the space. JSI provides training for facilitators and pays for the trainer’s time. The project also buys chairs for the center and contributes a small percent to run it, but the community itself must provide the on-going supplies and other expenses. Without such local interest and input, the initiative could not be sustainable. Local communities must not only want such a center, it must be prepared to support it as well.

The other important principle that rules the activity of the Centers is the respect for the real needs of their clients and the provision of high quality services. Therefore, before the Mociu meeting came to an end, participants were asked to evaluate the meeting. All said that it was very good and that they learned a lot. They all said that they would like to have more meetings on a regular basis and suggested several topics, including family health and family planning that they would like to learn more about.