

HEALTHCARE

To Live Free of Pain is a Fundamental Human Right Armenia's Recent Progress in Palliative Care

"What I want most is to be able to move again, to go outside. It hurts to move. I try, but sometimes the pain is unbearable."

- Elen, 14, who suffers from osteogenesis imperfecta

Committing torture is a fundamental violation of human rights. Nobody can deny this. But torture does not only come in the form of outright violence. Every year, millions of people around the world are left to suffer in pain without access to proper medication. The severity of the pain experienced by patients denied palliative care and pain relief can be even greater than that of traditional torture techniques, and it can last longer.

Governments often restrict access to crucial pain medications for a variety of unacceptable reasons, such as exaggerated fears of addiction, failure to train physi-

cians in palliative care, and arbitrary regulations on morphine-derived substances. In doing so, they are not only controlling a substance, but violating a fundamental human right – the right to health. *(continued on page 2)*



Armenian representatives at the 12th Congress of the European Association for Palliative Care, May 2011

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With cancer rates steadily growing and the HIV/AIDS epidemic on the rise, the quality of care for patients and their families must be seen as an international public health issue. Today, morphine, the core medication for treatment of moderate to severe pain, is relatively cheap and widely available, yet people still die in excruciating pain in Armenia and around the world every day. To address this issue, OSF-Armenia and the Open Society Institute Palliative Care Initiative advocate for integration of palliative care into national health care plans and policies.

Palliative care is the active, holistic care of patients with advanced progressive illnesses. It uses a multidisciplinary approach to patient care, relying on input from physicians, nurses, chaplains, social workers, psychologists, and other health professionals to relieve suffering in all areas of a patient's life. While pain management is an important aspect of palliative care, this multidisciplinary area of healthcare also addresses emotional, spiritual, and social concerns that arise with advanced illnesses.

Until recently, palliative care was not recognized as a priority in the Armenian healthcare system. In 2009, OSF-Armenia supported a needs assessment which revealed some concerning statistics – with a total population of about 3 million, roughly 3,000 patients per day require palliative care in Armenia. Yet in all of Yerevan, which makes up half the population of the country, only 80-85 people are prescribed opioids for pain management.

The study drew a great deal of attention to the issue, and backed it up with solid facts. In addition, the recent increase in access to information on palliative care has played an important role in advancing this branch of healthcare in Armenia and reaching out to people interested in the field. Thanks to the efforts of dedicated people involved in the movement, palliative care has started attracting the attention of policy makers, healthcare professionals and human rights activists. As a direct result of these efforts, in December 2009, the Government of Armenia officially recognized palliative care as a new branch of healthcare.

With the support of OSF-Armenia and a newly formed Palliative Care Task Force, the Ministry of Health developed a policy paper in the field, designated a palliative care training center at the Armenian National Center of Oncology and developed a certified course on pain management and the prescription of opioids.

This spring, OSF-Armenia supported a team of experts from the Ministry of Health, state health clinics and uni-

versities who participated in the 12th Congress of the European Association for Palliative Care. The Congress, which took place in Lisbon from May 18 to 21, brought together organizations and specialists from across Europe. It was an excellent opportunity for Armenian experts to discuss the challenges of palliative care in the country, showcase its most recent developments, and gain innovative approaches in the field.

“The entire event went extremely well,” said Dr. Narine Movsisyan of Yerevan State Medical University and the Palliative Care Task Force. “It was on such a huge scale and featured some of the greatest minds in the field. We are very happy with the way we represented Armenia and with the exchange of ideas we had with our international colleagues.”

Just weeks later, on June 9, Armenian Deputy Minister of Health Sergey Khachatryan spoke at a UN High-Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS in New York. He made a strong statement about the government's commitment to increasing the accessibility of opioids for pain management. “We should work together to ensure the removal of over-restrictive legal and regulatory barriers that prevent access to controlled medications for all those that need them for pain treatment,” he said. Mr. Khachatryan closed his statement by reiterating the importance of holistic palliative care, expressing his confidence that this meeting would help establish the roadmap for universal access to quality healthcare for people living with HIV, “including physical, spiritual, psycho-social, socio-economic, legal, nutritional and palliative care services.”

Now, with the political will in place, it is imperative to turn statements into actions. Dr. Hrant Karapetyan, President of the Armenian Pain Control and Palliative Care Association, is hopeful about the future of palliative care in Armenia. “I'm an optimist,” he says. “To work in this field, you have to be an optimist. But I think the future is looking good for palliative care in Armenia, because it's apparent now, through our assessment, that there is a huge need. And policy makers are responding to that need.”

The biggest challenge in establishing an effective palliative care system in Armenia, as the Deputy Minister pointed out, is availability and accessibility of pain management medications. OSF-Armenia is working closely with the government and with civil society in order to secure this fundamental human right for all Armenians. ■

Parliamentmonitoring.am: New Website to Track National Assembly Voting Records and Parties' Adherence to Pre-Election Platforms

On May 18, Mandate NGO presented its third report on the monitoring of legislative activities in the National Assembly. The report, which covered the fall 2009 and spring 2010 sessions of parliament, was prepared with the support of OSF-Armenia. Representatives of political parties, media, NGOs, national and international organizations were in attendance at the presentation.

After discussing the report, project director Lusine Vasilyan presented www.parliamentmonitoring.am, a new

website that compiles statistics about the activities of political parties and members of parliament, making them available to the general public. It tracks voting records and patterns, absences, and the extent to which parties adhere to their pre-election platforms. The data is generated based on the public information available on www.parliament.am, the official website of the RA National Assembly.

As Varuzhan Hovhannyan of Transparency International put it, “Both the report and the site provide important information to voters on key issues of interest and the actions of the parliament members they have elected. Most importantly, these kinds of projects contribute to achieving and maintaining a level of integrity in the promises and actions of MPs.” ■

PARTNERSHIP FOR OPEN SOCIETY INITIATIVE

Participants Voice Concerns About Hindrances to Free and Fair Elections During Discussion on Electoral Code Amendments

On April 11, the Partnership for Open Society Initiative organized a discussion called “Amendments to the Electoral Code: New Guarantees for Free and Fair Elections.” The event brought together government representatives, MPs, representatives of civil society and international organizations. The focus was on existing bad practices surrounding elections, proposed legislative changes, and the effectiveness of these changes in addressing systematic violations throughout the election process.



A productive discussion on Electoral Code amendments, April 2011

Vahan Hovhannisyanyan, head of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), stated that both the ARF and the Heritage Party were invited to participate in the working group for amendments to the electoral code, but refused as the invitation had come at a stage when only minor changes were possible. ARF had prepared eleven recommendations for electoral code improvement, which were sent to the attention of the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe’s advisory body on constitutional matters. Mr. Hovhannisyanyan stressed the importance of transparency and proposed opening up voters’ lists to prevent fraud during ballot counting.

Civil society representatives spoke at the event, highlighting a number of issues that persistently hinder the possibility of free and fair elections in Armenia. Among them, Boris Navasardyan, President of Yerevan Press Club, criticized television stations for not providing equal opportunities to all political parties, and Levon Barseghyan, Chairman of the Board of Asparez Journalists’ Club, shared his experiences as a monitor, speaking about major violations in the precincts, such as double voting, intimidation of voters, and fraud.

At the end of the discussion, a statement was prepared summarizing civil society’s main concerns with Armenia’s current election practices and the process of drafting amendments to the Electoral Code. The statement is available on the Partnership for Open Society’s website at www.partnership.am/en/Statements/38380. ■

Monitoring Report on Administrative Court Provides Recommendations for Legislative Amendments

Over the past year, with the support of the Open Society Foundations-Armenia, Protection of Rights Without Borders NGO has been monitoring the activities of the Armenian Administrative Court, the results of which they have compiled in a report. On April 19, the Partnership for Open Society Initiative organized a presentation of this report.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Hrayr Ghukasyan, Associate Professor of Law at Yerevan State University and OSF-Armenia Acting Board Chair, highlighted the importance of monitoring as a tool for civil society, particularly in the realm of administrative justice. “Monitoring is a serious means to pinpoint and solve problems, and a good method of empirical research,” said Mr. Ghukasyan. “Sometimes, we may have good laws that are poorly administered, and monitoring comes in to even out the gap.”

The author and main presenter of the report, Siranush Sahakyan of Protection of Rights Without Borders, rec-

ognized the establishment of the Administrative Court in 2008 as a step forward in improving Armenia’s justice system. However, the report revealed a number of legislative flaws and bad practices.

Deputy Minister of Justice Aram Orbelyan informed those in attendance that some of the issues outlined in the report are already being addressed by a package of legislative amendments that have been presented to the National Assembly.

After the presentation, representatives of NGOs and legal practitioners discussed their views on the state of administrative justice in Armenia. Participants questioned the objectivity of the Administrative Court and expressed concern about the fact that the government can easily take legal action against citizens through several avenues, while citizens can only take action against administrative bodies in very limited cases when a certain number of conditions are met.

Discussions are underway with the Ministry of Justice regarding the monitoring report, and participants are hopeful that the recommendations outlined therein will be taken into consideration while finalizing the legislative amendments package. ■

INFORMATION

Smartphones Just Got Even Smarter...

They learned Armenian. On May 4 at the Best Western Congress Hotel, representatives from hy-AM.org, a group of activists working on Armenian language inclusion in information technology, presented the project that made this possible. The audience included Internet activists, linguists, government and private sector representatives, and members of the media.

The Armenian Language Support for Smartphones project aimed to increase accessibility of information in the Armenian language. Implemented by hy-AM.org with the financial support of the Open Society Foundations-Armenia, the project aimed to increase accessibility of information in the Armenian language. As a result, websites, electronic books and other files written in Armenian fonts are now accessible on most smartphones.

“Until now, with most smartphones, squares would show up if you tried to open something written in Armenian,” said project coordinator, Aleksey Chalabyan. “Now it is possible to read Armenian on mobile devices working with Android, Maemo, Meego, Symbian and Windows Mobile operating systems.” It is also possible to write in

Armenian fonts with all of the operating systems mentioned except Symbian.

Several Armenian fonts were developed through this project and they can easily be installed using specially designed installation packages, which are available at www.hy-am.org. They are distributed free of charge and are based on open source technology, allowing for easy use, distribution and further development of the software. ■



Presenting the Armenian Language Support for Smartphones project, May 2011

STRATEGIC LITIGATION

Ten NGOs Will Receive Support on Policy Improvement Through Strategic Litigation

This spring, OSF-Armenia's Strategic Litigation Program held a competition aimed at strengthening the legal capacity of NGOs focused on the protection of rights. Applicants presented projects that required legal support and expertise in strategic litigation. Thirty organizations applied, and although it was originally planned to select three to four winners, based on the quality of the applications and the diversity of the needs that they addressed, ten NGOs were selected. They will receive approximately \$15,000 each for the realization of their projects.

The selected organizations represent a wide range of spheres, including ecology, disability, women's rights, social rights, military, and freedom of expression. The legal capacity of the organizations will be strengthened through the project, particularly through the involvement of in-house lawyers, who will initiate strategic litigation and specialize in legal counsel specific to each organization's needs.

As an additional support, there will be ongoing training sessions, seminars and mentorships, including a training session slated for July on strategic litigation and the European Court of Human Rights. The session will be conducted by a representative from the International Protection Center (Moscow).▪

MEDIA

OSF-Armenia Supports Thoughtful, Issues-Driven Programming

The Open Society Foundations-Armenia continues to support television stations and online media by encouraging them to produce debate programs and talk shows on the country's political, economic and social issues. These types of programs can be an alternative source of information for viewers, offering a level of quality, both in terms of content and format, that is generally lacking in Armenian media.

This spring, OSF-Armenia held a call for proposals for the production and broadcast of debate-style alternative programming. In May, after a very competitive process, the Board selected five local television stations from different regions of Armenia as winners. The local stations – Lori TV, Alt TV, Kyavar TV, Sosi TV, and We Plus NGO (via Tsayg TV) – were awarded funding to produce programs discussing priority topics such as human rights, freedom of the press, access to justice, education, public health, and other issues faced by their specific regions and the country as a whole. The programs will also be available on the stations' websites.

Yerkir Media, which has nationwide coverage, was also among the winners, and in cooperation with Hetq Investigative Journalists, will prepare short, topical documentaries and broadcast them on a program called Hraparak, followed by a lively discussion on major issues in Armenia.

Two media companies with strong online components, A1+ and 1in.am, were selected as winners in the online category. They will receive funding to produce quality online socially conscious programming. OSF-Armenia supported A1+ as they began their online coverage of Armenian news in 2010, and is keen on seeing more media outlets, both online and traditional, form a healthy competitive environment that promotes pluralism.▪

Rise in Court Cases Against the Media, According to CPFE Quarterly Report

On April 12, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE) publicized the findings of its first quarterly report of 2011. The report presents the economic and legal environment in which the media has been working, as well as cases of harassment endured by journalists from January to March 2011.

CPFE did not record any cases of physical violence against journalists during this period. However, they did note a significant rise in cases of pressure against the media. Of the 15 recorded cases, five were in the form of threats against editorial offices and reporters, and 10 were cases of libel and slander launched against media outlets. The number of court cases was unprecedented.

Ashot Melikyan, Chairman of the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, summed up CPFE's assessment as follows: "This parade of court cases against the media

is not only due to libel and slander in their publications, but more due to intolerance of criticism, especially on the part of politicians. This is nothing but an attempt to silence unwanted media.”

With the support of OSF-Armenia, CPFE will continue to monitor the situation in the field and publish its find-

ings in its quarterly reports. The full text of the Q1/2011 report and the organization’s other publications can be found on their website, www.khosq.am. ■

EDUCATION

Youth Debate Competition Fosters Critical Thinking and Flexible Learning

On May 30, the Open Society Foundations-Armenia organized a youth debate competition in Yerevan as part of the Armenia Debate Program. Six debate clubs participated, hailing from Yerevan and the regions. The teams were well prepared, which both delighted the judges and made their task extremely difficult. ArmBrain, a team from Metsamor School No. 1, won the competition, followed by Aratta, from Yerevan.

The topics included corruption, education, death penalty, and economic development versus environmental destruction. As a student from Aratta mentioned, the competition was intense, but the participants learned a lot and enjoyed meeting their peers from other schools. Following the competition, there was a training session for coaches and students. Russian trainers affiliated with IDEA (International Debate Education Association) held exercises that helped strengthen specific skills, including preparing for a debate, building a case, and selecting a rebuttal strategy. The debate competition was a great success and is planned to be a repeat event.

The Armenia Debate Program was initiated by OSF-Armenia, with the support of the Open Society Youth Initiative. The program aims to engage youth in critical, reasoned discussion about issues important to their lives and communities. It seeks to foster the practice of debate as a flexible learning tool within schools, youth clubs, community centers and NGOs. ■



Youth from Team Aratta engaged in an animated debate, May 2011

EAST-EAST PROGRAM

Working Towards Opening a Rehabilitation Center for the Blind: Armenia Hosts Experts from Poland and Georgia

Rehabilitation centers play a crucial role in integrating blind people into society and empowering them to live full, independent lives. Currently, there are more than 12,000 blind people in Armenia, but not a single rehabilitation center. The establishment of a rehabilitation center for the blind in Armenia is one of the long-term goals of a project entitled, Independence: Creation of Aid and Support for Disabled People in Armenia, Georgia and Poland.

The project was initiated by Hangravan NGO with the support of the East-East: Partnership Beyond Borders Program. It took the form of a three-stage series of study tours. Each stage took place in one of the participating countries. The first stage was in Poland, the second in Armenia, and the third in Georgia. The Armenian leg of the study tour took place from May 1-10. Twenty experts from Poland and Georgia who work in rehabilitation centers for the blind and relevant NGOs visited centers and institutions for the blind in different parts of the country. They shared their experience and knowledge about rehabilitation centers and established a network of

like-minded people and organizations in Armenia. During this visit, the mayor of Gyumri promised to provide

a space for Armenia's first rehabilitation center for the blind, a major milestone for the project.



Participants from Armenia, Georgia and Poland discuss rehabilitative care for the blind, May 2011

The transfer of knowledge and the discussions held during this study tour were beneficial to all parties involved. Participants from Poland shared their experience regarding their recent integration of the American model of rehab centers, which includes courses in rehabilitation education, art therapy, orientation and daily care skills. As a next step, a small group of Armenian experts will go to Poland in September, where they will attend a training seminar to prepare them as trainers for Armenia's future rehabilitation center. ■

EMERGENCY FUND

Eight Farmers' Cooperatives Receive Grants Through Jinishian Memorial Foundation and OSF-Armenia Partnership

OSF-Armenia continues its support for farmers' cooperatives in overcoming the effects of the economic crisis, particularly devastating for farmers because of the recent downturn in agriculture. During the period of March-May 2011, the Fast Impact Grants to Farmers project gave grants to eight farmers' cooperatives. Thanks to the project, 349 farmers received 350 kilograms each of nitric fertilizers, which they consider a top priority for the beginning of the farming season. The grants were made possible by a joint effort of the Jinishian Memorial Foundation, which gave \$27,000, and OSF-Armenia, which matched the funding with \$25,000. ■

Chambarak Soup Kitchen Reopens its Doors

Over the past year, 24 public soup kitchens have been operating throughout Armenia thanks to a project called Global Crisis: Corporate Social Responsibility to Support High-Risk Groups in Armenia. The project is implemented by Mission Armenia, and has received funding from OSF-Armenia, USAID and the Armenian government.

In January 2011, USAID funding came to an end and government funding did not come through because of budget cuts. With this considerable decrease in funding, Mission Armenia was forced to temporarily suspend the operation of several soup kitchens, some of which have since reopened.

Most recently, the Chambarak soup kitchen reopened its doors, thanks to an initiative headed by Prim, a Chambarak-based NGO, with the support of OSF-Armenia, Mission Armenia and the Chambarak community. The closure of the soup kitchen, which served 60 extremely vulnerable beneficiaries, had had a detrimental impact on the community. Fortunately, with an \$8,000 grant from the Emergency Fund and \$5,300 co-funding, the Chambarak soup kitchen is once again serving daily meals and providing social services to community members in need. ■



A member of Arevik Farmers' Cooperative displays his newly fertilized crops, April 2011

OSF-Armenia Offers Support to Blind Professional Musicians

Since 1976, the Musical Ensemble of the Blind Association of Armenia has delighted audiences across the country and been a strong proponent for the empowerment of people with disabilities. The ensemble currently has 45 members, including musicians and a choir.



The Blind Association Musical Ensemble Choir performing in 2010

Due to the financial crisis, the ensemble had not received any funding this year and was in dire financial need. Salaries could not be paid, so members had been on compulsory unpaid leave for months. Responding to this urgent need, OSF-Armenia gave a \$13,520 grant through the Emergency Fund, which will enable the beneficiaries to continue working and organize a concert for the 35th anniversary of the ensemble.

The director of the Musical Ensemble of the Blind Association of Armenia, Mr. Simon Hovhanissyan is a distinguished blind composer with several high honors, including the Honored Art Worker award, the Movses Khorenatsi government medal and the Ministry of Culture gold medal. He expressed his deep gratitude to OSF-Armenia, stressing that the blind musicians rely only on a meager allowance and sincerely enjoy what they do. The ensemble's work is vital for the social integration, independence and general well-being of its members. ■

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Call for Proposals: Strengthening Civil Society Through Arts & Culture

The Arts and Culture Program works at the nexus of arts, culture, human rights, and social advocacy. Through its grants, the program strives to encourage broad-based critical reflection and catalyze social action in parts of the world where open societies are absent or weak, and where the cultural rights of minority groups are endangered.

In particular, the program provides grants to strengthen alternative and autonomous cultural infrastructures and innovative arts initiatives in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, Moldova, Mongolia, and Turkey.

Applications will be accepted on an ongoing basis through December 31, 2012.

For detailed information, please view the Strengthening Civil Society Through Arts & Culture proposal guidelines.



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