The Medical Network as a Bridge to Health and Peace

Report on an International Conference and Training Workshops
4-7 May 2000
Gracanica, Bosnia

Prepared by Paula Gutlove
September 2000
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Medical Network for Social Reconstruction in the Former Yugoslavia is pleased to acknowledge support from a wide range of sources. This support has made it possible for the Network to be established, to continue its programs and to hold meetings, training workshops and seminars. Support for the international seminar and training workshops in Gracanica came from: CARE Austria; European Commission, Directorate-General IA; Know-How-Center, Osterreichische Stadtebund, Bundeskanzleramt; Medical Foundation, London; International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War - Austria; MEDACT, London; US Institute of Peace; members of the Rockefeller family; Winston Foundation for World Peace; and individual donors.

Moreover, we wish to acknowledge the hard work of five organizations: OSMIJEH, host of the Gracanica meeting which was co-chaired by its director, Hamdija Kujundziel; OMEGA Health Care Center (Graz, Austria); Slovene Philanthropy (Ljubljana, Slovenia); the Center for Psychological Assistance (Zagreb, Croatia) and the Institute for Resource and Security Studies (Cambridge, Massachusetts).

Without the support of our sponsors and the hard work of our members, the Network would be unable to continue its important mission, which is to promote dialogue, cooperation, personal contacts, practical solutions, and the renewal of relationships in the area.

REPORT INFORMATION

This report was prepared in September 2000 by the Institute for Resource and Security Studies in cooperation with OMEGA Health Care Center. For more information about this report or to obtain copies, please contact:

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The Medical Network as a Bridge to Health and Peace

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The Medical Network as a Bridge to Health and Peace

Bosnia And Herzegovina
According to Dayton
I. Introduction

This report describes linked events -- an international seminar and training workshops -- that were held in Gracanica, Bosnia, in May 2000. The seminar and training workshops were organized by the Medical Network for Social Reconstruction in the Former Yugoslavia, whose history and purpose are described in Section II, below. Section III provides an overview of the Gracanica program. The Gracanica conference had four distinct but interrelated activities, which are described in Section IV. These four activities were: demonstration of existing grass roots programs; professional training; Medical Network program planning and organizational development; and international promotion of concepts of social reconstruction. Section V discusses the impact of the meeting, and section VI provides some broad conclusions.

II. History and Purpose of the Medical Network

The Medical Network for Social Reconstruction in the Former Yugoslavia is a network of health care professionals from all parts of the Former Yugoslavia. It is dedicated to the reconciliation of existing conflicts and the prevention of further conflicts in its region. It is founded upon two major beliefs. First, violent conflict and war are the ultimate threat to public health. Second, the medical community has a unique and crucial role to play in promoting a healthy society, not only by mending the physical and psychological wounds of individuals but also by rebuilding structures for public health care and creating bridges for community reconstruction and social reconciliation. To these ends, the Network aims to promote dialogue, cooperation, personal contacts, practical solutions, and renewal of relationships in its region.

The Network has evolved from its origins in 1991, as a small group, which met sporadically in conjunction with meetings of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW). Now it is a network of over one hundred health professionals, including physicians, psychologists, university professors, teachers, and local and national government health-related ministers. Since 1993, it has convened annual meetings and has organized projects and training programs for medical professionals and medical students. Even during periods of extreme violence in the region, the Network has orchestrated broad-based participation and has brought together polarized parties. The Network was officially established in its present form in April 1997, at a conference in Graz, Austria. In April 1998, health professionals from more than 10 countries convened in Sarajevo to exchange knowledge and to plan collaborative programs.

The Medical Network functions through a "Contact Group" composed of pairs of representatives -- a medical professional and a medical student -- from each of 12 different geopolitical points throughout the former Yugoslavia. Through the Contact Group, communications throughout the former Yugoslavia are
facilitated, to promote a multi-pronged strategy for action based on the following principles:

- Communication and collaboration in joint activities.
- Open information and knowledge exchange.
- Support for non-violent conflict management activities, including conflict prevention and post-conflict reconciliation.
- Pro-active development of programs to help spread ideas of peace and health.
- Spreading the basic ideas of the Network throughout the whole of society.

The Medical Network's collaborative programs cover a range of content areas, including:

- refugees and resettlement;
- health care and social reconstruction;
- programs for youth and adolescents;
- professional training in trauma, psychosocial treatment and related program development;
- development of civil society through voluntary programs; and
- professional training in conflict management and reconciliation.

The Network enjoys cooperative relationships with international medical organizations, including the World Health Organization, the International Society for Health and Human Rights, and the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

III. Overview of the Gracanica Program

Since 1997, members of the Medical Network from Slovenia, Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia have cooperated to support the development of grassroots community reconciliation programs in different parts of former Yugoslavia. One such grassroots program, in the town of Gracanica, in Northeast Bosnia, is called OSMIJEH (SMILE). Since its initiation in 1997, OSMIJEH has developed a variety of voluntary action programs aimed at the reconstruction of the social situation in the region. It now has over 800 supervised volunteers, from all ethnic groups, who are working together to provide basic health and psychological assistance and to revive and reconstruct the local community. Their work provides a dramatic, moving example of what can be done when people truly want to live in peace.

In May 2000, the Medical Network convened a landmark conference in Gracanica, hosted by OSMIJEH. The greater Gracanica community falls within both the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. It is also part of a wider Bosnia-Croatia-Serbia triangle. This unique location makes Gracanica accessible to all factions from Bosnia and to participants from all parts of the former Yugoslavia.
IV. Four Interrelated Conference Program Activities

The Gracanica conference had four distinct but interrelated activities:

1. Demonstration of existing grass roots programs

The meeting was a showcase of the OSMIJEH programs that have worked so well in the Gracanica area. OSMIJEH demonstrated its programs, via site visits to rural schools, a kindergarten for handicapped children, a health care center, elderly care facilities, programs for adolescents and young adults, and counseling centers. In addition, OSMIJEH arranged opportunities for visitors to experience local hospitality, including traditional music, dance and foods.

2. Professional training

The meeting provided training for an international group of health professionals, primarily, but not exclusively, from the former Yugoslavia. The training workshops were taught by Medical Network members and covered the following subjects:

- Caring for special-needs children (for medical professionals and the parents of handicapped children from the special-needs school in Gracanica);
- Developing and supervising voluntary action programs;
- Delivery of professional care to war-traumatized people, including issues of burnout and caring for the caregivers; and
- Health as a bridge to peace by integrating trauma recovery and community reconciliation.

Information about developing and supervising voluntary action programs appears in Appendix B: “Developing Voluntary Action Programmes”.

Information about integrating trauma recovery and community reconciliation appears in Appendix D, “Health as a Bridge for Peace Briefing Manual.” This manual, and a booklet entitled “Trauma Recovery and Community Reconstruction, Selected Readings for Workshop Participants” were distributed to all workshop participants. The booklet is available upon request.

In addition to the training workshops at the Gracanica site, immediately before the Gracanica program a special session was presented at Tuzla University. This session introduced the Network’s core training programs to 26 graduate medical and pedagogy students. Moreover, supplementary training workshops were conducted by Network members for residents of the surrounding community, with the themes: working with children with special needs (for parents and teachers); and empowerment training (for teachers). A total of more than 100 people participated in these supplementary training activities.

The training programs did more than provide professionals with urgently needed skills. They provided unique opportunities for bridge building between communities
that have been divided by conflict. Participants came from different conflict-separated regions of the former Yugoslavia (e.g., Kosova, Serbia, and parts of Bosnia). For many of the participants, this occasion provided a much needed, neutral meeting ground. Indeed, an important goal of the conference was to facilitate the productive interaction of different factions from around the former Yugoslavia.

3. Medical Network program planning and organizational development

The Gracanica meeting featured a facilitated seminar for Medical Network members to discuss Network activities, principles and plans. This provided important opportunities for organizational and developmental work for the Network. Plans were made for future activities, including: training programs in Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Kosova; professional exchange programs among hospitals within the region, including bringing physicians from the North Caucasus to the former Yugoslavia; and collaboration between the Network and the German government on the coordination of psycho-social programs in the region.

4. International promotion of concepts of social reconstruction

The Gracanica conference provided an opportunity for medical professionals from conflict-torn areas outside of the former Yugoslavia, and for representatives from international NGO and intergovernmental organizations, to observe a grass-roots social reconstruction program in progress. International participants had an opportunity to discuss the public health situation in their country and the work of their organization. There were opportunities to discuss the potential development of Health Bridges for Peace programs in other conflict-torn areas.

The conference brought together 65 health-care professionals from Serbia, Kosova, Montenegro, Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia. In addition, three colleagues came from Chechnya. All three are members of the Medical Alliance for Peace through Health in the North Caucasus. International members came from the USA, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, Germany and the UK to lend their support. The colleagues from Chechnya described the public health situation in Chechnya and Ingushetia, where they were living as refugees. Their stories provided a moving and dramatic counterbalance to the situation in the Balkans. The Chechen colleagues reported that they learned many lessons about social reconstruction that they are anxious to implement, in their words, "as soon as the objective situation improves at home."

V. Impact of the Gracanica Meeting

The Gracanica meeting was covered by radio, television and print media within Bosnia, and knowledge of the Network’s activities has grown as a result of this coverage. One particularly media-friendly event was a tree planting ceremony that occurred towards the end of the program. On the penultimate day of the meeting, the host organization OSMIJEH brought everyone out into an empty field near the village center. The town council of Gracanica had donated this land to OSMIJEH, on which they could build a
new community center. They did this to recognize the fact that OSMIJEH had made an indelible impact on this town, where 100% of the population has been touched by war and 80% are now unemployed. OSMIJEH’s program of voluntary action to promote social reconstruction is the most empowering and significant program in the region. We were assembled to plant a tree on this field, the first step towards the construction of the new community center. The tree was also a symbol of the hopes and dreams that the participants in OSMIJEH hold for the future of their community, which is rebuilding itself after four years of bombing and war. The tree planting and the story of the Network’s program made the evening television news throughout Bosnia and were on the first page of the leading Bosnia newspaper.

At the closing session of the conference, one of the Chechen colleagues stood up and showed the group a small plant she had dug up from the field where we had gathered to plant the tree. "My garden at home was destroyed. I will bring this plant home with me and plant it to remind me that even after a war, beautiful things can once again grow. People told me at home I shouldn’t come here--we knew no one, it would be too difficult, too dangerous. But we were determined to come--even if we had to walk. And we are so glad that we did. It would have been worth walking. Thank you."

VI. Conclusions

The Medical Network for Social Reconstruction in the former Yugoslavia provides a beacon of hope in the recurring violence and instability of the former Yugoslavia. The organization is growing in size and in organizational integrity. It has developed modes of communication, through email and fax, that span the region and function notwithstanding dramatic fluctuations in the political climate. Concrete health care delivery initiatives have been organized successfully across “enemy lines.”

With the support of international NGOs and intergovernmental organizations, the Medical Network for Social Reconstruction in the Former Yugoslavia has demonstrated that medical professionals have a special role to play in healing communities that have been devastated by violence.

A photographic essay, entitled, “Photographs from Conference and Training Program in Gracanica, Bosnia” was compiled following the program, and is included with this report as Appendix C.
Appendix A: Participants in the Gracanica program
(In Bosnian Language)

**SPISAK UCESNIKA KONFERENCIJE U GRACANICI**
**OD 04. 05. DO 08. 05. 2000. Godine**

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2. Bjorn Daniel Olof            Sweden
3. Kosac                        Igalo          Crna Gora

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    Smajlovic Adnan
    Culic Mirza
    Kapetanovic Murisa
    Marmarac Arnela
    Grbecic Izida
    Hajric Amra
    Smajlovic Fatima
    Dogdic Medina
    Hasinovic Aida
    Mujcic Elvira
    Devedcic Miha
    Becic Mersija
    Durakovic Mirela
    Omercic Rahmija
    Alibegovic Mirzet
    Cuca Almira
    Sulejmanovic Zlata

UKUPNO UCESTVOVALO:     69 + 3 + 18 = 90 osoba
Appendix B:

APPENDIX B

List of Medical Network Contact Group Members

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Appendix C:
DEVELOPING VOLUNTARY ACTION PROGRAMMES

Workshop Trainers - Anica Mikus Kos and Emir Kujuh

No. of participants: 35 (mental health professionals, teachers, medical workers, mentors of voluntary work, volunteers)

Programme:

Presentation of the theoretical frame of voluntary work

Volunteers as a protective influence in children's lives

The social context of modern voluntarism

Presentation of volunteer activities in which participants are involved

Identifying needs for voluntary activities

Introducing volunteers in a medical setting - role playing

Introducing volunteers in a school setting - role playing

Presentation of models of "good practice" of voluntary projects

Discussion about problems linked to the development of voluntary work in institutional settings

Problems encountered in the field of voluntarism by members of workshop and exchanging ideas and experiences about prevention or resolution

Drawing an invitation to volunteers for participation in a project

Motives for volunteering

Educating and supporting volunteers
STUDENTS AS VOLUNTEERS

Trainers: Anica Mikus Kos and Hamdija Kujundzic

Workshop for 38 students of the University of Tuzla

Programme:

Introduction in the topic of voluntary activities in the contemporary society with special focus on needs in post-war circumstances

Members of the group presenting their experience with voluntary work

Identifying benefits of volunteering for students

Preparing a project of voluntary work in the community and presenting it on a poster and orally

The most frequent problems encountered by volunteers and organizers

Reflection of the seminar and ideas for future work
Appendix D

Photographs from
Conference and training program in Gracanica, Bosnia
Convened by the
Medical Network for Social Reconstruction in the Former Yugoslavia

May 4-7, 2000