



VOICES OF THE UKRAINIAN COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION

Demographic changes in the Seattle area are having a profound impact on the local health care delivery system. Health care providers need to hear from ethnic communities about their experience in trying to access health care. Offering culturally appropriate care requires being open to the perceptions, realities and expectations of a community that may be different from one's own.

The Cross-Cultural Health Care Program (CCHCP) in Seattle, WA works with health care providers, interpreters and community-based organizations to address these needs. Established in 1992, the CCHCP is funded by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. This "Voices of the Communities" profile is one of a series developed by the CCHCP. The profiles and an earlier survey of 22 underserved ethnic communities are part of the CCHCP's effort to provide a forum for underserved communities to interact with the health care community. These profiles were developed by and in consultation with members of the profiled community.

UKRAINIAN DEMOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

History and economy

Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe. It became independent in mid-1991, after the breakup of the Soviet Union. A highly developed industrial country, Ukraine has been experiencing a severe economic crisis since its independence. A continuing fuel shortage and poor harvests have led to widespread undernourishment. In addition, the country is still suffering the health effects and environmental contamination from the 1986 explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power station. Approximately 100,000 people were exposed to high levels of radiation before being evacuated.

Language

The Ukrainian language began to be differentiated from other Slavic languages, Russian in particular, as far back as the 12th century. It developed independently up to the end of the 17th century, when eastern Ukraine was seized by Russia. Russian czars issued laws prohibiting the Ukrainian language in the beginning of the 19th century. After that, it fell into decay in Russian Ukraine. The Ukrainian language in western Ukraine, which was part of Austria-Hungary and Poland, absorbed a large stock of Polish, Hungarian, German and Romanian borrowings. Ukrainian became the official language of the land in 1917. Western Ukraine was reunited with Soviet Ukraine in 1939.

Social values

Ukrainian ethnic culture is that of an agrarian country, rooted in land and nature. Ukrainians were also influenced by both Russian and European culture. Values include education, professionalism, efficiency on the job and punctuality.

Religion

The main religion in Ukraine is the Eastern Orthodox (Christian) faith. Under Russian domination, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was forced to become part of the Russian Orthodox Church and remained so until 1990. With Ukraine's independence, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has been restored. The second largest Christian denomination in Ukraine is the Greek Catholic Church.

Pentecostal and Ukrainian Baptist churches were active in western Ukraine. Both were persecuted when western Ukraine was united with Soviet Ukraine. Pentecostals were less than 1 percent of the population in Ukraine, but they, along with Jews, became one of the largest refugee groups from the former Soviet Union.

Family life

Ukrainian Pentecostals are hard-working people with strong family ties and strict rules against drugs, alcohol and smoking. Birth control is rejected by their religion and they often have big families. Children are usually under the care of elderly family members. Because housing is limited, Ukrainian Pentecostals often live three generations to an apartment.

THE UKRAINIAN COMMUNITY IN THE SEATTLE AREA

Population size and residence

The primary reason for leaving Ukraine is religious repression. Of the approximately 8,500 Ukrainian refugees in King County, about 60 percent are Pentecostals. There has been a constant flow of refugees from both groups to the Puget Sound area since 1985.

Most Ukrainian Pentecostals in the Puget Sound area came from rural areas and small towns. They have settled in Lynnwood, Everett, Kent, Renton, Auburn, Federal Way, SeaTac, Redmond, Woodinville and Kirkland. Most Ukrainian Jews settling here came from urban areas. They have settled mostly in Seattle and Bellevue.

Language

Most Ukrainian Pentecostals who have settled here speak only Ukrainian but can understand Russian and Polish. Most Ukrainian Jews are bilingual, speaking both Ukrainian and Russian. Few can understand or speak Yiddish.

Community organizations

A variety of community social service agencies serve the Ukrainian community, including the Employment Opportunities Center, Refugee Federation Service Centers, and Refugee Women's Alliance, among others. The Soviet Union Refugees Association in Bellevue helps new arrivals adapt to U.S. life and culture.

CONCEPTS OF HEALTH CARE AND MEDICINE

Medical care and providers

In Ukraine, good doctors try to reveal the possible causes of disease. They focus treatment on causes rather than on symptoms or on the disease itself. The family doctor or primary care provider does not exist in Ukraine. Patients do not choose their doctor. Adult patients go to a district doctor. If they are not satisfied with the services or find the treatment ineffective, they may find another doctor, who would expect to be paid for giving advice or treatment. District doctors have the authority to write out "sick lists" for both adults and children. These documents state the disease and the numbers of days to stay at home or in hospital. Patients try to maintain a good relationship with doctors, often by means of bribes.

Doctors in Ukraine work in tandem with a nurse, who does most of the paperwork. The patient's medical history is carefully recorded and kept for years, including all visits to specialists, immunizations, laboratory tests and hospitalizations. Patients can see specialists on their own or on the district doctor's advice. Chiropractors are gaining more respect as efficient health care providers. Many people in urban areas prefer a chiropractor for certain treatments.

Hospital stays in Ukraine are more lengthy than in the United States. This may be partly because of crowded housing conditions where infectious diseases may spread quickly.

Maternal and child health

Pregnant women register with the district obstetric clinic. They have regular monthly checkups and take a mandatory training. They are given an eight-week leave both before and after delivery. If complications arise, post-delivery leave may be extended to 10 weeks. The new mother and the baby stay in hospital for five to seven days after birth.

For children there is a separate district doctor and a network of hospitals, clinics and rehabilitation centers. Child immunization against several diseases is mandatory. Children without immunization can't be enrolled in schools or day care centers.

Mental health

Mental health does not receive due respect in Ukraine. Even the word "mental" has a negative implication because it is connected with "mental illness." Historically, mental problems were a taboo. They were not supposed to be discussed, not even in the family. It was shameful and sometimes dangerous to admit that someone in the family had mental problems.

Traditional healing

Herbal and folk medicine are used in Ukraine alongside Western medicine. Herbal and folk treatments are more common in rural areas where there are insufficient medical services and medicines. Folk remedies also are considered less harmful than chemical medication.

Diet

Until the 20th century, most Ukrainians lived in the country and had a diet based on garden and farm foods. Ukrainians are famous for their hospitality and imaginative cuisine. Many recipes require eggs, sour cream, butter and other rich ingredients. Ukrainians enjoy food and cooking and don't concern themselves with being overweight. Sport and physical exercise are popular with youth. But once married, many Ukrainians find they don't have time to maintain their physical condition.

CULTURAL BARRIERS TO HEALTH CARE

Medical care and providers

Ukrainians generally are patient and undemanding of the health care system. Having a doctor they trust is important, however. This trust depends on the doctor's personality, concern, professionalism and awareness of cultural differences in providing health care services.

Ukrainians are not used to having to choose their own doctor and don't have anyone to advise them on this choice. If they don't trust their doctor, they will ignore the doctor's advice. Some Ukrainian patients complain that doctors are not attentive enough to their problems and rely too much on sophisticated diagnostic equipment. Often Ukrainians think a doctor's unsatisfactory performance stems from the fact that the Ukrainian patient is poor and uses medical coupons. The patient may try offering a gift in hopes the doctor will be more cooperative.

The focus of medicine in Ukraine is on revealing causes of a disease. Ukrainian patients in the United States often feel doctors have little interest in the cause but instead are trying to treat the disease only. Since the majority of Ukrainian Pentecostals arriving in the United States lived in villages and small towns, they were offered only basic laboratory and diagnostic procedures. They are not used to the sophisticated medical treatments available in cities.

Suggestions

- Information is needed to familiarize new arrivals from Ukraine about U.S. health care practices.
- Health care providers need to explain treatments and diagnostic procedures since these may be unfamiliar to Ukrainians.
- Provide information about mental health and the help that is available for depression.
- Provide information on achieving a balanced diet.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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This profile is based primarily on discussions with representatives of the Ukrainian Pentecostal community, with doctors and nurses from Russia and Ukraine, and with more than 30 Seattle-area Ukrainian men and women of all age groups.

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This is a condensed version of the profile. For the complete profile and survey report, please contact the Cross-Cultural Health Care Program, (206) 860-0329 or at www.xculture.org.

This "Voices of the Communities" profile was made possible by a grant from the SAFECO Corporation.

January 1996