

## TBEC's delegation visits Romania – March 2011

Our primary link was with Romanian Centre for Health Policies and Services, a local professional health think tank. Ms Cornelia Matic there had arranged at short notice for us to have a spot in the national gathering of TB stakeholders on 21<sup>st</sup> and to visit Calarasi on 22<sup>nd</sup>. From conversations and contacts around the meeting on 21<sup>st</sup>, we managed to set up private meetings on 23<sup>rd</sup> with several of the key players in TB advocacy in Romania.

Meetings on the 21<sup>st</sup> was at the Institutul de Pneumologie 'Marius Nasta' which appears to be the prime national TB facility. We had 15 minutes to explain about TBEC's objectives and activities to what was a wide audience of government TB Officers and several NGOs. It was helpfully just before the lunch break so we asked interested people, especially from NGOs, to come and talk to us. That led to various more detailed meetings on 23<sup>rd</sup>.

The visit on 22<sup>nd</sup> to Calarasi (about 100 kms East of Bucharest) was helpful in getting a feel for the operation of TB services. We met with a few medical staff who were quite energetic in TB advocacy generally.

On 23<sup>rd</sup>, we had a series of detailed meetings:

- At the University Public Health Institute arranged by Dr. Florentina Fortunescu who brought in colleagues from the national Public Health association, a Roma health policy centre, and the Romanian TB Patients' Association.
- At the Romanian Red Cross with Dr. Victoria Mihaescu who brought in colleagues involved in psychotherapy for MDR patients and in youth projects.
- At CPSS with Dana Burduja and Cornelia Matic
- At the University Medical school with two student leaders active in TB advocacy

Had we had more time, there were two further agencies we would have liked to meet:

- The Romanian Angel Appeal who act as Principal Recipient for the Global Fund Round 7 grant for TB activity.
- The local Open Society Institute office.

Each time, we specifically asked the individuals we were meeting if they were willing to join TBEC. That plus a general request to the audience on 21<sup>st</sup>, led to the total of 15 names to the TBEC listserve. All are active in TB advocacy, all have heard us talk about the aims and activities of TBEC, all have agreed to join TBEC, all are from NGOs or are in positions from which they can act independently of the national programme.

Impressions overall were that:

- a) There is an energetic network of organisations and individuals in the Romanian TB world
- b) They are not very co-ordinated for advocacy action
- c) Several of the individuals would be very effective advocates at EU level given their understanding of TB issues and good English
- d) On the whole there seemed to be quite good relations between the various players but, as anywhere else, we began to pick up some slight tensions between them which will need to be borne in mind

- e) The usual frictions between traditional doctors and more community-oriented activists are evident
- f) There is little parliamentary advocacy for TB.
- g) There is little linkage on TB advocacy between Romanian agencies and equivalents in neighbouring countries. We heard only of very occasional meetings with people in Bulgaria and there was reference to one person who had attended some regional event in Belarus a year or so ago.
- h) They have immediate need for enhanced advocacy because the GF monies which account for around 25% of current national spending on TB will disappear over the course of the next 18 months. It is spread over time as different programmes have different end dates. The effect, however, will be a massive shortage of funds for continuation of current levels of activity. Likelihood of government picking up the difference is small in the current economic climate.
- i) Thus, for example, GenXpert was not mentioned once during the national gathering on 21<sup>st</sup> March. From later enquiries, we learnt that there are 3 machines in the country, placed in reference labs, with a mixture of medical conservatism and lack of funds blocking broader usage. Yet their levels of resistance cry out for active use of this new diagnostic tool.
- j) On the other hand, national TB incidence has been reduced by 30% over the past 9 years showing the impact of having extra funds. A reduction in resources could easily lead to a resurgence.

A follow-up meeting in Bucharest on the advocacy needs of the Romanian TB scene seems relevant. Such a meeting would be a very practical demonstration of the role of TBEC and also help generate greater co-ordination among Romanian groups. Replacement of GF funding is urgent. EU, as well as the local government, should be pushed to contribute. TB coordinators at country level will have to defend their cause very strongly, and also the national NTP coordinator will need extra advocacy skills to fulfill this role. The incidence rate is going down, but if we are not continuing with at least the same strength and preferably more (active case finding through the general health system and civil society mobilization) the gains will be lost very soon.