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Awards to TB journalists in Romania



On 9 May 2016, the US Embassy in Romania together with the Association for supporting MDR TB patients (ASPTMR) held a conference on tuberculosis treatment in Romania, with particular focus on the impact of transition from international donors (Global Fund) to national funding.

The conference had a two-fold aim: first of all, highlight the necessity of additional funding for TB and MDR TB diagnostics and treatment after the withdrawal of Global Fund funding in 2017, and secondly, award 8 Romanian journalists, who have successfully participated in the ASPTMR organized competition "Watch me through my eyes". The journalists present represented all types of media, from newspapers and magazines to radio and TV. All of the participants have prepared either an article, a video or a radio show on TB issues, ranging from patient treatment to diagnostics. In the majority of cases, journalists chose to speak with former or current patient with MDR TB or XDR TB. The interviews allowed getting more insight into the everyday experience of TB survivors in Romania. Furthermore, the award-receiving news articles were published evenly throughout the year, and not just in run-up to the award ceremony. Thus, TB and its related issues remained in the public space and consciousness for extended period of time.

The conference began with the speech of His Excellency US Ambassador, Mr. Hans Klemm: "Romania has approximately one fourth of all tuberculosis cases and one third of all drug-resistant cases in the EU and the EEA despite having only 4% of the population. As a consequence, Romania faces the challenge of securing funds for the complete implementation of its national strategy. The Government of Romania and the Ministry of Health should prioritize securing the gaps in funding the tuberculosis program to help eradicate this disease in Romania. One of my priorities, one of my objectives as Ambassador of the United States to Romania is to improve and enhance the prosperity of our two countries, of American citizens, but also of



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Romanian citizens. Our goal in this priority is to build a stronger, healthier, democratic Romania, to be a stronger partner, a stronger ally of the United States. Health is a major challenge for Romania, as the events of the past few weeks have unfortunately and tragically demonstrated again and I would like to encourage both the Romanian Government, but also Romanian society to put appropriate emphasis on improving its health infrastructure and eventually health outcomes. And TB is one disease that is subject to relatively rapid improvement once adequate resources are focused on it. It is a disease associated with the poor and by eliminating the disease it could also help the economic and social outcomes for the poor. And by not doing so, Romania is holding as a whole back its social and economic development.”

Furthermore, the president ASPTMR, Catalina Constantin stated: “Although TB treatment is free, public funds are insufficient to finance the treatment of multidrug-resistant cases. Treatments are provided by the National Tuberculosis Control Programme in Romania (NTP), the financing of the Global Fund to Fight HIV / AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2009-2014. These projects external funding will end in 2017, patients with resistant forms of tuberculosis will not have access to treatment. The solutions proposed by our Association are increasing the budget of the National Tuberculosis Control Programme to ensure rapid diagnosis and treatment of disease and patient support interventions takeover by local administration”.

During the conference, the president of the jury, Mr. Jonathan Stillo, an American medical anthropologist who has researched TB treatment and diagnostics in Romania for almost a decade, joined the participants by teleconference from America, and stated: “As an American who loves Romania and views it as his second home, I am honored to be here with you to help present the awards for TB journalism. This marks five years that I have partnered with the US Embassy in Bucharest on TB related activities. If you asked me ten years ago, when I first arrived in Romania as a TB researcher, I never would have guessed that TB would still be a major problem today. Why? Because it seemed so fixable. Yet today, after years of studying the problem and seeing how complicated it is, I truly believe that with political will and the appropriate funding, Romania can beat this disease, which kills three of its citizens every day. Many Romanians believe that TB only affects the poorest most marginal members of society such as the poor, the Roma, and those who use alcohol and drugs. This is not true. I have met Romanian doctors, lawyers, professors, students and even Olympic athletes with TB. However, because the disease is so stigmatized, many people hide their TB, especially the wealthiest patients. This is an airborne, infectious disease that is curable and can affect anyone. It does, however, disproportionately affect the poor as they are the members of society with the least access to good health care, especially at the primary care level. They also have the most difficulty completing the long treatment and working to support their families at the same time. Over the past ten years, I have held the hands of more dying patients that I can say. I have watched families suffer after the death of a loved one. These are what doctor and anthropologist Paul Farmer calls “stupid deaths.” These deaths are stupid, because with proper care, these people (with very few exceptions) are curable.

The jury then proceeded to award the journalists - Diana Brancusi (of the public television TVR), Madalina Samoila (private television Antena 1), Marilena Francu (public broadcaster Radio Romania Actualitati), Dan Brumaru (Click newspaper), Gabriela Dumba (Puterea newspaper), Ana Maria Predila (Gazeta de Sud newspaper) and Tatiana Dabija.