

WESSEX TEAM PLANTS SEEDS OF “CHANGING CHILDBIRTH” in Lithuania

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Introduction

After last year's successful midwives' conference in Vilnius [1] the faculty for the 2nd UK Lithuania obstetric conference was extended to include four midwives, two obstetricians, a paediatrician and an obstetric anaesthetist. The programme was structured around two simultaneous lectures, one nominally for midwives and the other for doctors. The original venue where we were last year had to be changed to the Trade Union building because, in spite of the suggestion that there should be a maximum number of 200 delegates, the final number was 438 including 90 obstetricians.

The outbound journey

I had flown out to Denmark the previous day to give two lectures at the Gentofte hospital so I met my team in the transit lounge at Copenhagen airport. They were all in very good form after a little glass of something on the way across and reminiscing about the unfortunate remark made by the SAS steward who had spilt coffee on a midwives lap.

“I am so sorry was I making it come over your trouser!”

After arriving in Vilnius we went to inspect the conference centre and then moved on to have a late lunch at a local Chinese restaurant. All went well until someone asked our host what was in one of the dishes — it turned out to be strips of chicken stomach in ginger (yuk).

The conference

There were two lecture theatres, one which could seat approximately 900 delegates and the other about 100. A major problem was the assortment of different slide projectors, all of which had slightly different carousels. So it was essential that we all acted as projectionists for other members of the team. The biggest disaster was at the beginning of an obstetrician's talk when I pressed the forward button and the whole carousel shot backwards across the room and dumped 30 slides on the floor. The paediatrician got himself inadvertently locked in the small lecture theatre for over an hour while playing with some multimedia equipment. At one stage people wishing to attend his afternoon lecture on birth asphyxia were hammering on the outside of the locked door while he was doing the same on the inside.

A wide range of lecture topics were covered, compatible with the broad specialist experience of the team. These included *major obstetric haemorrhage, anaesthesia for Caesarean section, physiology and management of pre-eclampsia, an obstetrical anaesthesia clinic, vaginal delivery after previous Caesarean section, role of complementary medicine in childbirth, pregnancy after renal transplantation, midwifery training in the UK*. The translators consisted of two very charming obstetric registrars, who did an excellent job. One of them was definitely challenged by one of our midwives — whose talk required some translation of her very expressive body language!

The local hospital

We visited a local obstetric hospital called St Jacob's which had an annual delivery rate of about 1500. The charming large motherly obstetrician who showed us around her hospital said that it was under threat to be either converted to a hotel or a brothel! We saw an interesting set of callipers for measuring the sacro pubic diameter (greater than 18 was OK for vaginal delivery!). All delivery rooms had ultra-violet lights, the use of which in the former Soviet Union was believed to kill all known microbes. Syringes and milk bottle teats were re-used and we also saw a large plastic lemonade bottle full of sharps. Certain practices in Lithuania were some years behind those in the UK. For example anyone having a third Caesarean section was compulsorily sterilised and following any vaginal delivery after a previous Caesarean section it was obligatory for the obstetrician to check the uterine scar even in the absence of an epidural! Epidurals in labour are rarely performed in Lithuania, except at the hospital of Dr Arthur Irlin, one of our hosts, where there is now a 25% rate.

Entertainment

On the Friday night we went to an excellent BBQ restaurant. Three of the Midwives arrived slightly shaken after an extremely fast drive in a local taxi. One had apparently shut her eyes and screamed (which made the driver drive even faster) and another's half finished bottle of beer had spilt drenching the contents of her handbag, including a camera. Later that evening the other seven members of the team (one of whom was dressed apparently only in pyjamas covered with an overcoat) had livened up the town in their search for more liquor with choruses of various songs like “Brown girl in the ring”.

At the end of the conference we were each presented with a delightful print by a well known local artist, before rushing downtown to join crowds watching a local stunt pilot attempting to fly his aeroplane under all ten bridges of the City. The end of the Conference was slightly blighted by Lena the organiser having her wallet stolen from her handbag.

The final evening we experienced a “sauna party” in the basement of the local airport police headquarters where one of the Lithuanian midwife's husband worked. This consisted of an excellent cold buffet washed down by generous glassfuls of local alcoholic beverage including cranberry liquor, vodka and beer. In keeping with local tradition Andy the paediatrician and I then ventured bravely into the very hot sauna which certainly increased our vasodilatation but this was remedied by plunging into the cold swimming pool. The cycle was then repeated and we were then followed by all the girls dressed only in towels and bizarre shower caps. Photographs will definitely NOT go in the local hospital magazine!

The final day

We visited the Vilnius market which occupied 4 square kilometres and where all sorts of goods were being sold at relatively cheap prices. For example I picked up 3 pairs of Caterpillar trainers for a total of only \$30 – I am sure they must have fallen off the back of a lorry somewhere as my son assures me they are priced at £65 each in the UK. We then enjoyed lunch in an excellent restaurant, bought some pieces of amber as presents, and after a 2 hour stop-over in Copenhagen we arrived back at Heathrow generally exhausted but elated with what we felt was a useful and informative conference. We won't have made any major differences to the somewhat out-of-date (by UK standards) midwifery and obstetric practices in Lithuania, but hopefully we will have planted some seeds for the future, particularly among the younger delegates. These are the people who may be more open-minded and hence more likely to change to evidence-based practices.

References

1. Thomson KD. North Hants Team Deliver in Vilnius. *Today's Anaesthetist*, 1999; **14** (4): 92-93.

