

## **AAMSC: Bringing Health to Armenian Lives for 22 Years**

Annual Gala of Largest U.S. Armenian Medical Society Raises \$100,000 for Building of Clinic in Armenia's Rural Voskevan Village

BEVERLY HILLS—More than 400 members and supporters of the Armenian American Medical Society of California (AAMSC) gathered at the Beverly Hills Hotel to celebrate the organization's 22nd anniversary, and to raise funds for the AAMSC Voskevan Village Clinic Project in Armenia. The event generated around \$100,000 for the project, according to AAMSC president Dr. Varoosh Alaverdian.

"The Armenian American Medical Society is proudly celebrating our 22nd anniversary tonight, and it is to the credit of our past presidents, members, and the steadfast support of our elected officials throughout the state of California that we have been able to serve our people here in the Diaspora and in our homeland," said Dr. Alaverdian. "As healthcare providers, we have a responsibility to tend to those in need—especially those who cannot afford the services that they may require. The tireless commitment of our members continues to make it possible for our society to ensure that our indigent communities receive the healthcare that they need and deserve."

Alaverdian noted that the medical society's membership has increased to more than 300 physicians and health care practitioners—a sure sign that the Southern California Armenian-American medical community is growing in strength and numbers.

A video presentation—created by renowned director Ara Soudjian—highlighted the many auspicious projects of the AAMSC in California and Armenia (please see Sidebar).

### ***Continuing in a Dynamic Tradition***

As part of its projects in the homeland, the AAMSC has also established clinics in three villages that border with Karabagh and Azerbaijan—Aregouni in 2005; Pokr Mazrik in 2006; Tsapatagh in 2007—in order to make the war-torn region more habitable. These clinics have alleviated a tremendous burden for these villages that are largely populated by refugees from Karabagh, as the closest health facilities could be as many as eight hours away. Each clinic has a full-time nurse who provides care to patients throughout the week, and a physician visits each clinic at least once a week. The clinic in Aregouni also provides dental care to patients. The clinics are managed by the region (marz) and the mayor (marzbed), and the federal government pays the salaries for the physicians and nurses.

In July 2007, members of the AAMSC and AANA, along with representatives from Yerkir USA traveled to the Gegharkunik Region of Armenia to inaugurate these three clinics. Gegharkunik mayor Nver Poghosyan and deputy mayor Ardusha Ghoukasian greeted the delegation, and each village held a reception to celebrate the inauguration of the clinics.

"Our delegation was well-received by the mayor of the Gegharkunik region, as well as the residents of each village," said Dr. Armen Cherik. "The people were happy to have these clinics, and our society was very pleased to see that construction was completed as promised, and all three clinics are ready to operate."

In 2008, the AAMSC began construction of a fourth clinic in the northeastern village of Voskevan.

Faced with limited resources, the villagers in Voskevan were forced to convert their kindergarten into a clinic. Now, fifteen years later they have a need for the kindergarten again—and they've kept their school and classroom supplies very safely in storage. These villagers live in an environment that belies the horrors that they have faced throughout the last decade. They are surrounded by breathtaking nature, but the deserted homes of Turks who once occupied this village are a constant reminder of the years the villagers lived in terror.

Due to the rising costs of construction, this clinic will cost \$75,000 to build. Proceeds from this event have been earmarked for two purposes: the construction of the Voskevan clinic; and the creation of a program through which the AAMSC will sponsor residents and physicians to volunteer in Armenia on a one-month to three-month basis and make rounds among the three clinics.

“What I saw worried me—I don't know how well the government will be able to take care of these clinics,” said Dr. Armen Cherek. “This is why we came back with the idea to have the AAMSC sponsor residents and physicians to volunteer there on a one-month to three-month basis and make rounds among the three clinics. There, they will have the opportunity to teach the local doctors about advances in medicine, serve their people through their profession, while giving the AAMSC a first-hand account of the progress these clinics are making.”

The Armenian American Nurses Association (AANA) has also pledged to help facilitate the operation of these clinics, by training the nurses to provide patients with the best in administrative, pediatric, maternity, and critical care.

The mayor of Voskevan, Emma Hakopyan, expressed her sincere and heartfelt thanks to Yerkir USA and the AAMSC for bringing the three clinics to fruition. Hakopyan is a graduate of agricultural sciences from the Yerevan Technical Institute, and spent some time in Iowa for her training. She called on the organizations to continue such work in Armenia—a call that the AAMSC and Yerkir USA duly heeded.

### ***AAMSC Lifetime Achievement Award***

Dr. Alaverdian then introduced the evening's guest of honor-- Dr. Andranik Ovassapian - - to receive the 2008 AAMSC Lifetime Achievement Award for his decades-long work in the field of anesthesiology and difficult airway management.

Dr. Ovassapian received his medical degree in 1962 from the Shiraz Medical School in Shiraz, Iran. He continued his education at the University of Pennsylvania, where he completed training in anesthesiology and a research fellowship. Ovassapian returned to Shiraz Medical School in 1968 and served as Chairman of the Department of Anesthesiology for six years, advancing the status of the department in patient care, residents' training, and clinical research.

In 1974, Dr. Ovassapian returned to the United States and joined the Department of Anesthesiology at Northwestern University in Chicago to pursue his interest in research and airway management. In 1975, he became chief of Anesthesia at the VA Lakeside Medical Center and in 1983, he was promoted to professor. In 1998, he joined the Department of Anesthesia and Critical Care at the University of Chicago and established its Airway Study and Training Center.

Dr. Ovassapian became interested in management of the difficult airway after witnessing airway-related disasters that resulted in loss of life. In the 1970s, he began applying the flexible bronchoscope for difficult tracheal intubation. By the 1980s, he and his colleagues had developed a program that included simulation models and patients to train anesthesia residents in the use of the flexible bronchoscope to evaluate and manage a difficult airway. By 1991, he had patented the Ovassapian Intubating Airway.

Dr. Ovassapian's research interest in the field of respiratory physiology, thoracic anesthesia and airway management has led to the publication of 42 peer-reviewed articles, 48 book chapters, and three books. He has spent considerable time traveling, and has been involved in many local, state, national and international societies. He has served as president of the Illinois Society of Anesthesiologists. In 1995, he founded the Society for Airway Management, becoming its first president. He has received numerous honors and commendations for his groundbreaking research in the field of difficult airway management.

Alaverdian welcomed Dr. Ovassapian to the podium to present him with the 2008 AAMSC Lifetime Achievement Award. "I would like to thank the AAMSC for bestowing on me this tremendous honor. I have been given many awards throughout my career, but this Lifetime Achievement Award is especially significant because it is from my Armenian colleagues and peers--and the first such award that I have ever received," said Dr. Ovassapian. "The AAMSC is a very active society that has extended its philanthropic work to Armenia-- and I very much appreciate their efforts, because I have dedicated a large part of my career to helping the people of Armenia, as well."

Ovassapian also thanked Dr. Alaverdian, who was instrumental in nominating him for the prestigious award. Their 35-year friendship dates back to when the two were in medical school, where Dr. Ovassapian mentored the young Dr. Alaverdian who was four years his junior. Their friendship developed not only through their chosen profession, but also through their shared love of music as the two were in an Armenian band together-- Alaverdian playing the guitar, and Ovassapian playing the violin. "I'm very touched and honored that Dr. Alaverdian considered me to be worthy of this Lifetime Achievement Award," said Dr. Ovassapian. "It's wonderful to be honored, but especially by a society whose work is self-imposed--these Armenian doctors and healthcare professionals have come together to share their knowledge and resources in order to help the community in Los Angeles and in Armenia, and that is something truly commendable."

Dr. Alaverdian also fondly recalled the days when he and Dr. Ovassapian were in medical school, and said he was proud to be in a position to be able to honor his medical school mentor. "I have tremendous respect and admiration for Dr. Ovassapian--not just as a colleague and a physician, but also as a friend and mentor who played an instrumental role in my years of medical school and the beginning of my career as a physician. It gives

me great joy to be able to present him with the AAMSC Lifetime Achievement Award," said Dr. Alaverdian.

### *Commendations from Civic Leaders*

Dr. Alaverdian also recognized the dignitaries and civic leaders who were in attendance, including Consul General of Armenia in Los Angeles Armen Liloyan; Lisa Kalustian on behalf of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger; Haig Kartounian on behalf of Congressman Adam Schiff; Rita Hadjimanoukian on behalf of Los Angeles County Supervisor Mike Antonovich; Glendale City Council members Ara Najarian and Bob Youssefian; and former Glendale City mayor Rafi Manoukian.

Kalustian presented a certificate of commendation to the AAMSC on behalf of Governor Schwarzenegger, and noted how the work of the medical society in Los Angeles and Armenia echoes the goals and objectives that the governor has for the people of California. "The Governor knows that government should not, and cannot, be the sole solution for most public policy issues. As he continues his work to reform our healthcare system, he builds upon the coalition that came together—government and non-profit, business and labor, healthcare providers and consumer groups," said Lisa Kalustian. "We also need to expand capacity in the healthcare system through clinics and other mechanisms. The commendable work of the AAMSC provides needed services in the community while exhibiting the type of collaboration California needs."

The City of Los Angeles also offers many healthcare services to its residents, and the AAMSC strives to ensure that the community is aware of these services and works tirelessly in order to facilitate the continuity of care for those who are uninsured. "On behalf of Supervisor Antonovich, I sincerely commend the work of the Armenian American Medical Society of California. Each culture's success relies heavily on remembering their roots, and the AAMSC is a fine example of that. I applaud the AAMSC for championing the improvement of medical care and facilities in Armenia, and wish the society the best of luck in its endeavors in the Voskevan village," said Rita Hadjimanoukian.

One of the driving forces of the AAMSC is the strong connection to the Armenian homeland, and a deep desire to provide our Armenian brothers and sisters with the same level of healthcare that is afforded to residents of Southern California. The rural clinic projects are one shining example of how the AAMSC has gathered its extensive healthcare resources in order to ensure that every person has the opportunity to receive medical care. The government of Armenia, along with the doctors and nurses in the homeland, have continually expressed their sincere appreciation to their counterparts in the United States. "We value the activities of AAMSC in Armenia, because they complement the Government's efforts to improve healthcare in Armenia, particularly in border regions and rural areas. This issue is high on Armenia's Government agenda," said Consul General Armen Liloyan. "AAMSC projects in Armenia have proven to be a success and local communities have benefited from those projects through better access to medical assistance and new equipment and treatment methods. Training of doctors and transfer of new expertise is also important because it contributes to sustainable development of healthcare locally."

## *Celebration of Success*

As part of the evening's festivities, Artists for Kids coordinated the entertainment of Kev Orkian, a renowned comedian hailing from London who offered his congratulatory remarks. "It is wonderful to see the number of people here today supporting the efforts of the Armenian American Medical Society of California," he said, adding lightheartedly that, "without your generous contributions, those grandmothers in Armenia could not be dancing for joy." A trained, classical pianist, Kev Orkian also delighted the audience with several piano interludes—including the deftly played "Sabre Dance" by Aram Khachaturian.

Kev Orkian invited Dr. Alaverdian to the podium to present certificates of recognition to AAMSC past president Dr. Boris Bagdasarian; pharmacist Karolyn Ebrahamian; pharmacist Arsinee Kalfayan; Dr. Garo Kassabian; and Dr. Samuel Malayan, for their tireless efforts in implementing the programs sponsored by the AAMSC.

Alaverdian also recognized Glendale Adventist Medical Center; Dr. and Mrs. Armen and Vany Cherik; Glendale Memorial Hospital and Health Center; Glendale Physicians Alliance IPA; Washington Mutual Bank; Glendale MRI Institute; and HSBC Bank USA for their tremendous support of the AAMSC.

The evening concluded with the rousing music of singer Koko Hayitian, as guests danced well into the night.

## ***SIDEBAR BOX INFORMATION***

### ***The AAMSC: A Strong History of Innovation***

Since 1993, the AAMSC Juvenile Diabetes Project has been operating in Armenia under the leadership of Dr. Mark Nazarian. Life can be incredibly difficult and painful for children with juvenile diabetes, and their lives are often cut short because of complications due to the disease. Insulin remains a high-priority medication that is in short supply in Armenia. Through the support of the AAMSC, the medical community and pharmaceutical companies, the incidences of these life-threatening complications have dramatically declined. The AAMSC has also been working through a government-sponsored program to ensure that supplies and medicine are provided to all diabetic children free of charge.

In the mid 1990s, the AAMSC undertook the Shenkavid Maternity Hospital Project, which was inspired by Dr. Bedros Kojian, an OB/GYN specialist from Orange County who has also served as president of the AAMSC. Every year since the clinic's inception, Dr. Kojian has returned to the hospital to perform surgeries and to train the staff in the latest laparoscopic techniques. With the AAMSC and Dr. Kojian's efforts, more than \$250,000 of radiological equipment has been shipped to Armenia and the Third Maternity Hospital's radiology department now meets international standards.

In January of 2003, through the efforts of Dr. Armen Cherek and Dr. Mark Nazarian, the AAMSC established a pediatric epilepsy program in Armenia. Since its inception, the pediatric epilepsy clinic in Yerevan has hired a full-time pediatric neurologist and nurse, and the AAMSC has shipped equipment, books and anti-seizure medications to Armenia. Today, hundreds of children are receiving care and medication free of charge at the clinic.

The AAMSC has also created a program through which the organization will sponsor residents and physicians to volunteer in Armenia on a one-month to three-month basis and make rounds among the three clinics. There, they will have the opportunity to teach the local doctors about advances in medicine and serve their people through their profession, while giving the AAMSC a first-hand account of the progress these clinics are making.

Each year, the AAMSC and the Armenian American Nurses Association (AANA), along with the Armenian Dental Society of California (ADSC) hold a health fair at the St. Mary's Armenian Apostolic Church in Glendale. On that day, numerous AAMSC member physicians and nurses volunteer their services to consult uninsured patients—Armenian and non-Armenian alike—living in Glendale, Hollywood, and nearby communities. As many as 400 patients receive basic health screenings, cholesterol testing, spirometry, bone density exams, dental exams, cardiac testing, and eye exams at no charge. Female patients are provided with free mammography screenings, pap smears and nutritional counseling; male patients are given prostate exams.

Ironically, many of these patients qualify for Medi-Cal, but won't find out until they have a serious or emergent health issue. The AAMSC believes that it is crucial for Armenian-Americans to receive medical care, regardless of their financial situation. The goal of the health fair is not simply to provide patients with an annual physical exam, but also to anticipate their needs and refer patients to other county-funded facilities for continuity of care.

The members of the AAMSC believe that medicine is not just for when patients are sick or in dire need—prevention is fundamental. As such, the AAMSC encourages individuals to contact local social workers to learn whether they are eligible for health insurance. Our doctors don't want patients to wait until the last minute, or avoid seeing a doctor because they fear insurmountable medical bills. AAMSC doctors and nurses encourage their patients to get the insurance they deserve, and to see a physician regularly for the care that they need.

To this end, the AAMSC has partnered with Horizon Armenian Television to launch a one-hour talk show during prime time programming. Featuring physicians and health care professionals whose areas of practice cover the entire spectrum of allied health care, the show will be a dynamic resource for viewers interested in improving their health. The program, which will air twice a week, will emphasize the importance of preventative care, and focus on how people can and maintain a healthful lifestyle. The AAMSC believes that everyone should have the opportunity to receive medical care and advice, regardless of their financial situation. The aim of the television show is to provide an opportunity for the Armenian community to address their concerns with the counsel of bi-lingual health care professionals. The show will also provide viewers with information about the AAMSC and our activities in California and Armenia.

As part of its mission, the AAMSC offers monthly Continuing Medical Education (CME) courses to its members, as well as an annual ten-credit course that takes place in Las Vegas. These courses allow physicians from a variety of fields—nephrology, spinal surgery, gynecology, psychology—to maintain their competence while educating fellow healthcare practitioners about the advances being made in their specialty.

"The CME courses allow our members to broaden their healthcare perspective by hearing lectures about a diverse number of fields, and it gives fledgling physicians a powerful networking resource," said Dr. Raffi Tachdjian, who heads the AAMSC Mentorship Program. "Through the CME courses, and our mentorship program, young doctors, residents and fellows are able to receive the guidance that may otherwise be unavailable to them in the community. We want to demonstrate to them the importance of continuing education—to give them the opportunity to learn so that they may someday be mentors to the next generation of Armenian doctors."

The AAMSC also encourages its members to change the global face of medicine. Throughout the last decade, members of the AAMSC have participated in the First and Second International Medical Congresses—a comprehensive forum for healthcare professionals and experts from throughout the world—in Yerevan. The landmark event comprises a diverse spectrum of scientific presentations, as well as satellite symposia linking regional healthcare professionals with the international Armenian medical community attending the Congress.

As the second largest Armenian medical society in the world, it has behooved the members of the AAMSC, which include well-known professors and researchers, to contribute their expertise to the International Armenian Medical Congress. It has afforded the AAMSC a tremendous distinction to have its members participate in the International Armenian Medical Congress as they present their research and innovative advances in technology and medicine.

For more information about the AAMSC and its projects, contact Hasmik Keyribarian, (818) 943-4274. Membership in the AAMSC is free of charge for residents, fellows and medical students.