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Mortality Rate for Romanian Children With HIV in Constanta Drops Significantly; Hundreds Receive Care and Treatment at Children's Center

*-- Baylor Pediatricians, U.S. Ambassador, Public Health Official and Healthcare CEO
Discuss Center Results, Challenges and Lessons Learned --*

HOUSTON, USA and CONSTANTA, ROMANIA, April 6, 2004 — Hundreds of Romanian children infected with HIV through unsafe medical practices in the 1980s and early 1990s are now receiving high-quality care and antiretroviral (ARV) treatment at the Romanian-American Children's Center (Centrul de Copii Romano-American), a comprehensive pediatric HIV/AIDS program established in 2001 by Baylor College of Medicine/Texas Children's Hospital, the Infectious Diseases Hospital in Constanta and the Romanian Ministry of Health. With funding from the Abbott Laboratories Fund's Step Forward program and the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, the Center, which opened three years ago today, provides care for nearly 900 children in the day clinic and community, including more than 450 who are receiving ARV treatment. The Center serves as a model in Baylor's efforts to establish other pediatric HIV/AIDS centers.

Gathering today in Constanta are Dr. Mark Kline, director of Baylor's International Pediatric AIDS Initiative; Dr. Rodica Matusa, director of the Romanian-American Children's Center; directors of Pediatric AIDS Centers in Botswana and Mexico; Michael Guest, U.S. ambassador to Romania; Dr. Camelia Ciobotaru, director of the public health authority for Constanta county; Miles D. White, chairman and chief executive officer of Abbott Laboratories; local dignitaries; pediatric HIV/AIDS specialists; and public health professionals. They will dedicate the renovated children's ward at the Infectious Diseases Hospital, recognize results achieved and discuss lessons learned from the Romanian-American Children's Center.

"In just three years, the Center has decreased the mortality rate of children living with HIV/AIDS in Constanta from 15 percent to 3 percent, proving that it is possible to provide first-rate pediatric care and treatment in a resource-limited setting," said Dr. Mark Kline, director of Baylor's International Pediatric AIDS Initiative. "The average CD4 count, which indicates the health of a patient's immune system, has increased significantly, and children who were near death a few years ago are now leading active lives. While many challenges remain, we are confident the success of the Romanian center can be replicated. The Center provides high-quality medical services, acts as a stigma-free meeting place for children with HIV/AIDS and is the headquarters for psychosocial and home-based services.

Impact on Pediatric HIV/AIDS

In addition to the Center, with the Step Forward program's support, the following has been achieved since 2001:

- Renovation of the children's ward at the Infectious Diseases Hospital in Constanta, which has improved infrastructure and quality of care for all children served at the hospital
- Training of 240 medical professionals on voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) and HIV/AIDS care, including development of training programs for Romanian medical students
- Establishment and staffing of "Flower House," a family-style group home for 10 HIV-positive children who were either orphaned or abandoned

- Launch of countrywide voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) for institutionalized children, using 50,000 rapid HIV tests donated by Abbott Laboratories

Replicating the Model

The Romanian-American Children's Center is the first of Baylor's four-clinic pediatric HIV/AIDS network. Dr. Kline has brought together the directors from Baylor clinics in Botswana and Mexico to meet counterparts in Constanta for a weeklong workshop to share key learnings and to discuss plans for expansion.

“The greatest result anyone could ask for has been achieved: the lives of children have been transformed,” said Miles D. White, chairman and chief executive officer of Abbott Laboratories. “Children with HIV/AIDS are not only surviving but also thriving. Children living with HIV in Romania are now thinking about the future in new ways. Beyond surviving the next few months, they are thinking about college and what they want to be when they grow up. This model, developed in Romania, needs to be replicated around the world so that thousands of other children can benefit and have hope for the future.”

In addition to providing funding for the Center and related programs, Abbott is donating its HIV/AIDS protease inhibitors to treat up to 500 children for life.

Improving HIV/AIDS Care

“Initiatives like the Romanian-American Children's Center are paving the way toward a broader understanding of how public and private officials can cooperate to improve the lives of Romanian citizens,” Ambassador Guest said. “The Center clearly raises the standard of care for Romanian children with HIV/AIDS and a range of stakeholders — healthcare officials, doctors, pharmaceutical representatives, NGOs and patients — must continue this progress and find the best solutions for Romania.”

“We attribute the success of the Romanian center to a variety of factors, including a trained staff, highly motivated children and caregivers, a careful attention to factors influencing medication adherence, and a commitment to truly comprehensive HIV/AIDS care and treatment,” said Dr. Rodica Matusa, director, Romanian-American Children’s Center.

Establishing additional centers and sharing best practices with other medical institutions will be key to demystifying the care and treatment of HIV-positive children in resource-constrained settings and to enhancing access to modern HIV/AIDS therapies. Under Dr. Kline’s leadership, Baylor is establishing the Children’s Clinical Centers of Excellence Network to build essential infrastructure and capacity and to promote acquisition of knowledge that will enhance HIV/AIDS care and treatment globally.

The mission of the Baylor International Pediatric AIDS Initiative is to promote health for all people through education, research and public service. Our mission is pursued by providing comprehensive medical and social services to HIV-positive and HIV-exposed infants and children, by sustaining excellence in educating U.S. and foreign health professionals, and by advancing clinical research. Our mission currently encompasses programs in Houston, Romania, Mexico and Southern Africa. For more information, please visit www.baylorids.org.

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