Spanish cooperation with Latin America in transplant organization: the “ALIANZA” programme

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SUMMARY - The MASTER ALIANZA is a training scheme set up by the Spanish Organización Nacional de Trasplantes in cooperation with the Transplant Coordination Unit of the Hospital Clinic of Barcelona and with the academic support of the University of Barcelona. It is part of the “ALIANZA PROGRAMME”, one of the most ambitious cooperation projects started by the ONT aimed at translating the Spanish Model to all the Spanish and Portuguese speaking South American countries. The first edition of the MASTER held in Spain was addressed to 16 transplant coordinators from 11 Latin American countries who spent two months in Spain learning about the Spanish model of organ donation and transplantation. Similar schemes shared by other countries like Italy or Belgium will serve in the future to train other European transplant coordinators.

They are 16 Latin American doctors from 11 countries from Mexico to Chile (Figure 1). They left their jobs, homes and families for a couple of months just to come to Spain with a unique objective: to learn everything about the Spanish model of organ donation and transplantation. They had heard that it is the most successful in the world, they had read a lot about it, and some of them have just verified that it may work in their own countries. What they needed was in-depth knowledge of Spanish know-how, and this was only possible after a period of close contact with our transplant coordinators and our health system.

When this paper is published, the Latin American doctors will be back in their own countries ready to start a difficult task: to adapt what they have learned to their own national setting. It will be easier for some than others: they were sent by their Health Ministries or national transplant organization to learn all the necessary to translate the model at a regional or national level (as is the case of Argentina or Colombia). In other cases, such as Paraguay or Chile, the main person nationally responsible came to Spain to learn about our transplant system.

These doctors are the first participants of MASTER ALIANZA, set up by the ONT in cooperation with the Transplant Coordination Unit of the Hospital Clinic of Barcelona and with the academic support of the University of Barcelona. Its first edition held in Spain was addressed to transplant coordinators from Latin America, but a similar scheme, shared by other countries like Italy or Belgium will serve in the future to train other European transplant coordinators.

In this first Spanish edition, the participants stayed first in the Central Office of the ONT in Madrid, assisted by the Spanish Regional Council of Transplantation where the National and Regional coordinators agree on the Spanish policy on transplantation. Each of them spent a period of training in the largest Spanish hospital of twelve different regions, did a general training TPM course (Figure 2) and two specific courses on the family approach and non heart beating donation and attended an International Symposium on Cell Therapy. They had to present a final written project in the University and follow a specific internet module on organ donation before reaching the final Master’s degree. A

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true "marathon" in which the whole Spanish transplant system made a great effort to transmit its best knowledge and experience to our South American colleagues.

This MASTER is probably the most prominent, although not the most important part of the so-called "ALIANZA PROGRAMME", one of the most ambitious cooperation projects started by the ONT, with the aim of translating the Spanish Model to all the Spanish and Portuguese speaking South American countries. This activity was started ten years ago when the ONT developed the "PROYECTO SIEMBRA" ("Seeding project"), a programme similar to ALIANZA, although not so detailed, which saw the participation of 30 South American doctors trained through over a six month period in the largest Spanish hospitals.

A significant number of those coordinators did not find the basic conditions to develop in their own countries what they had learned (something which has now been solved in many cases thanks to the design of the transplant organizations). Communications did not help at that time (something that Internet has now also solved) but little by little some of these coordinators translated what they learned to some countries or regions, with significant improvements in organ donations and/or the creation of transplant organizations which never existed before.

Now there are countries like Uruguay with a transplant coordinator system quite similar to the Spanish one, with 19.3 donors pmp during 2004 (above the mean donation rate of the EU countries: 17 donors pmp). In some cases like Argentina we have developed a specific cooperation programme, with training courses and exchange of professionals with a change from a centralized old INCU-CAI (the name of Argentina's transplant organization) to a new one with a de-centralized structure with a transplant coordinator system very similar to the Spanish one which has allowed an increase in organ donors from six to more than ten pmp during the last two years. Other countries, with not such spectacular advances are now laying the foundations for future developments. Specific training courses for transplant coordinators like the one recently held in Ecuador will be held in several other countries during the coming months / years.

Thanks to the group of coordinators linked to these projects and grouped under the name "GRUPO PUNTA- CANA", we now know how many donors there are in the different countries of Latin America, a figure published in the official publication of the Council of Europe ("TRANSPLANT NEWSLETTER").

These highly positive experiences produced a "call effect" from all the other Latin American countries, looking for Spanish cooperation. The reason is very simple: most of
these countries see dialysis therapy as a very heavy economic burden, and many patients can be saved from dialysis or even from death with a transplant, dramatic situations that can only be solved if an adequate organization is finally developed. Many of these countries have a prevalence of dialysis patients not much lower than those of European countries, with comparatively much higher costs (in countries like Spain or Italy end-stage renal disease therapy accounts for 2% of health expenditure). In this situation, renal transplantation today means a better survival than dialysis therapy, a much better quality of life, and an initial cost greater than dialysis but much less after a period of two–three years (depending on the country) of functioning graft which is progressively increasing with time. Just some data: thanks to the Spanish model, after the creation of the ONT in 1989, we estimate that about 12000 more patients have been transplanted and kept away from dialysis therapy (over the basal transplant rate reached until 1989). With the current survival of transplant patients, the money that the Spanish health system has saved thanks to this reduction of dialysis needs means more than twice the cost of all the kidney, liver, heart, lung and other solid organs transplants now performed in Spain. It is not the case for spending more money but for spending better, and this can be applied perfectly well to Latin American countries.

On February 23rd representatives of 16 Latin American countries plus Spain reached a very important agreement in Montevideo which may become an historic one: the proposal to establish a “Latin American Forum of Organs and Tissue Donation and Transplantation” with the participation of the PANAMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION (the American branch of the WHO). In the same way that the Council of Europe has represented for our continent the only standing committee which has coordinated the different efforts and initiatives in this field during the last two decades, the Latin American Forum should be useful to harmonize the transplant policies in the whole continent and to channel Spanish cooperation in an adequate way. A future meeting in Cartagena de Indias (Colombia) should serve to finalize and implement the proposal that should be adopted by the Conference of Health Ministers at the end of the year.

Something is moving with organ donation and transplantation in Latin America, and certainly Spain and the ONT will do their best to contribute to improve the transplant systems of all these countries. Many lives can be saved.