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E-PAGE 1

Delegations From Japan, Russia Visit Haight Ashbury Clinics

International clients are rare at Haight Ashbury Free Clinics Inc. in San Francisco, but visiting international doctors and medical staff do visit often to witness firsthand the groundbreaking clinic and its many health care, substance abuse and mental health programs. This past month was no exception.

Two delegations, one from Japan and the other from Russia, visited HAFCI's medical clinic and left with new information, techniques and appreciation for the unique health care system pioneered by HAFCI.

Their missions were different, but the impact that the medical clinic has had on the visiting international doctors and medical staff was evident.

Darryl Inaba, a HAFCI research scientist, hosted the Russian delegation when they arrived from St. Petersburg. One was a pediatrician and the other two were administrators who came to see how the clinic operates.

Pediatrician Olga Sucuatova observed the activities in the clinic for three days while her colleagues, Yevgenia Yanshchikova and Anna Khmyroba, visited with Ben Eiland, HAFCI's director of development.

The Russian administrators were from an HIV program and wanted to see how to fund their program. "They were doing all the right things," said Eiland. "They were well organized."

The Russian delegation only stayed for three days, but a Japanese delegation visited many clinics during their two-week U.S.

Darryl Inaba

tour, stopping in San Francisco at HAFCI's medical clinic for a one-day whirlwind tour.

Inaba said that the Japanese doctors were amazed at the different views held by HAFCI staff. While Japan was dealing with some of the same drug problems as America, it approached drug problems differently, he said, noting that the Japanese doctors approached drug use as a social problem rather than as a disease.

But its HAFCI's approaches to mental health problems and drug addiction that garners so much attention from many international visitors.

"We're getting a reputation for dealing with emerging drug problems," said Inaba. "We're doing cutting-edge things right in the trenches and in the community."

Rick Seymour, manager of education and training, has helped host foreign visitors to HAFCI for 20 years. He said that the two Japanese guests weren't much different than previous guests.

Often, the United Nations, the State Department or other civic programs sponsor the delegates.

Seymour said that over the 20 years he has been involved with foreign delegations, he's learned that drug abuse transcends politics. Israelis and Palestinians, Greek and Turkish doctors from Cyprus, to name a few, have all made visits.

"The physiology of addiction is universal, but different cultures have very different solutions and deal with addiction in many different ways," Seymour said. "My sense is that these international exchanges and interactions between various parts of the world increase our knowledge and ability to understand and deal with the physiology of addiction."