

Inside PPTA

MEET THE PPTA STAFF

Larisa Cervenakova

MEDICAL DIRECTOR, M.D., PH.D.



Q How long have you been with the Association?

I joined PPTA in November 2016 but it feels like I have been with the organization significantly longer.

Q What do you focus on in your role as Medical Director?

Since I joined PPTA very recently, I am still in the process of learning from my colleagues at PPTA. So far, it has been a great experience! For the future, in my role as a Medical Director, I would like to contribute to our common goals by bringing plasma protein therapeutics to places in which there is a demand for these life-saving products and to the patients who are not adequately treated or not treated at all.

Q Tell us about your background.

I graduated with a Medical Doctor degree in 1981 from the Pirogov Russian National Research Medical University in Moscow, with a specialization in biochemistry. That same year I moved to live in the former Czechoslovakia. One year later, I joined the Drug Research Institute in Modra where I spent five years enjoying my favorite subject, immunology, while investigating the effect of new drugs on the immune system. This experience extended to the studies of the altered T-cell immune responses in patients with subacute sclerosing panencephalitis, a chronic form of measles, at the Institute of Preventive and Clinical Medicine in Bratislava (Slovak Republic). This research led to a Ph.D., which I received from the Comenius University in Bratislava in 1992. Next, I joined the Laboratory of Central Nervous System Studies at the National Institute of the Neurological Disorders and Stroke, which is part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). I was an International Fellow supported by the J.E. Fogarty International Center working in Dr. D. Carleton Gajdusek's lab. Dr. Gajdusek is a Nobel Laureate for the discovery of "kuru", the disease

that occurred in certain tribes of aboriginals of Papua New Guinea practicing ritualistic cannibalism. In 1991, I spent four months working in this laboratory under the supervision of Drs. Lev Goldfarb and Paul Brown and successfully hunting for mutations in the prion protein gene of patients with familial forms of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs)/prion diseases.

I joined the Plasma Derivatives Department at the American Red Cross (ARC) in 1997 and worked on multiple projects related to the safety of the blood supply and plasma-derived products. With the help of my colleagues, we were able to develop a strong program addressing the transmissibility of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob (vCJD) through blood transfusion in experimental models. During that time, I met many of the experts on the PPTA Pathogen Safety Steering Committee. I also had the opportunity to work directly with TSE-afflicted families, which I consider to be one of the most important and fulfilling experiences in my career.

Q What's your favorite city in the world?

I consider myself a "nomadic" person and it is difficult for me to pinpoint just one city which I like the most. Each city has its own character, flavor, smell, people, and memory. I can fall in love just with one street or a square or a building or a park or a church or a piece of art or music that resonates with the place. If I close my eyes, I see all these places at the time of the year when I visited them. I can vividly smell the standing waters of the canals in Venice, the wooden structure of the Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh, the fresh

snow falling on the streets, squares, bridges, and fountains of St. Petersburg, and the hot air and dog presence on the streets of Erice in Sicily. I can hear the bells of the Pražský orloj, a medieval astronomical clock in Prague, and the vocal conversation in Italian on the Spanish Steps in Rome. If I think of Vienna, it is Mozart, Strauss, and Klimt and an apfel strudel with a single shot of espresso accompanied by a glass of water. I enjoy standing on the pier in Palanga, Lithuania that extends into the Baltic Sea and feeling the strong northern winds, which take your breath away.

Q What characteristic do you most admire in others?

Honesty, compassion, and trustworthiness.

Q Tell us something that may surprise us about you.

I like to express feelings and ideas by writing poetry in Russian and enjoy surprising my friends with rhythms on special occasions. I still cannot achieve such proficiency in English.

Q Who's been an inspiration to you in your life?

My writing inspiration has always been Dr. Paul Brown, who never judged my English writing skills even when pieces needed significant editing. My inspiration for endurance and self-motivation is Dr. Lev Goldfarb, who helped me to settle in the U.S., provided unselfish mentorship, and entrusted

me with the invaluable samples from patients with various neurological diseases, for molecular genetic analysis. Many of you may remember Dr. Bill Drohan, the Chief of the Plasma Derivatives Department at the ARC, who was an example of a strong leader and a human being ... he even remembered the names of each individual's spouses and children! I can continue with the list of people who were inspirational, supportive, and had a significant impact on my life, but I am afraid that this writing would then become an elaborate memoir. Many of you in the industry became my life-long colleagues and friends and I am grateful to you.

Q How did you get involved in this industry?

My five years of work on transmissible spongiform encephalopathies at the NIH were ending at the time when the epidemic of vCJD started in the United Kingdom. The uncertainty about the vCJD threat to the blood supply brought me to the J.H. Holland Laboratory of the ARC to address some of the questions that the plasma and blood industry faced. I have read almost every issue of The Source magazine from its first publication and kept on file many issues of the magazine. I call it a "wheel of life" that I was listed as a speaker of the PPTA meeting in Rome in 2002 and now I am a "happy camper" within this industry. ●



COMMEMORATING 25 YEARS OF SAVING AND IMPROVING LIVES

JUNE 13, 2017

This year, PPTA celebrates 25 years of saving and improving lives. In recognition of this, we will be hosting a black tie gala in Washington, D.C. on the evening of June 13, 2017 at the Mellon Auditorium in Washington, D.C. Registration will be in conjunction with the 2017 Plasma Protein Forum and will be open on a limited "first-come, first-served" basis. Watch the PPTA website for more information in the coming months. ●