



January 1st through June 30th, 2015

NEWSLETTER

ALBANIAN AMERICAN MEDICAL SOCIETY

First Albanian President Visit to U.S. Hospital

On May 9, 2015 Albanian President, Mr. Bujar Nishani, visited the Acquavella Heart Valve Center at New York Presbyterian Hospital, New York, NY



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DR. DENNIS M. DIMITRI ELECTED PRESIDENT OF MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY

The Albanian American Medical Society (AAMS) is proud to recognize Dr. Dennis M. Dimitri MD, FAAFP, for his outstanding achievement in being elected President of the Massachusetts Medical Society (MMS) starting in May 2015. Dr. Dimitri, who practices family medicine, will be the first Albanian American Physician ever to be elected to this position. MMS is a major thought leader on healthcare in the United States as well as the publisher of the New England Journal of Medicine, one of the most influential medical journals in the world.

Albanian Heritage

I have always been proud of my Albanian heritage even though I was born in the United States, in Worcester of Massachusetts. My maternal grandfather Louis (Treska) Vasil was the first member of my immediate family to come to the U.S. He traveled from Albania to the US more than once in the era just around WWI. On those trips he was part of the VATRA band in the Boston region. I have seen photographs of him playing the tuba in that band sometime around 1918.

He finally immigrated permanently to the US in about 1923 bringing with him my pregnant grandmother who was from Korca. Soon after arriving in the US she delivered my eldest aunt. Several years later my mother Dhimitra Vasil was born in Worcester. Though born in the US, my mother was thoroughly Albanian, attending Albanian school in Worcester, and learning to read write and speak fluently in her parent's native language.

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AAMS former Presidents Dr. Lindita Çoku (center), Dr. Sulejman Çelaj (right) and Current President Dr. Gentian Lluri (left)



HIGHLIGHTS

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MMS NEW PRESIDENT



DENNIS M. DIMITRI,
MD, FAAFP

My paternal grandfather Qiriako Dimitri was from Belavoda. He and his 2 brothers raised their families there in the early part of the 20th century. Soon after WWI ended he came to the US looking for economic opportunity, leaving my grandmother, father and uncle in Albania. My father spent the school year with other family members in Korca so that he could attend school there, and in the summers return to Belavoda living with his mother and his uncles and their families.

In 1936 when my father was 17 years old my grandfather sent money and tickets to Albania so that my grandmother, father and uncle could all join him in Worcester where he had settled and prepared a home for them to come to. My father spent one year attending immigrant school in Worcester where he learned to read and write English. He worked in several restaurants and factories for the next 5 years then in 1942 was drafted into the US army. He was not yet an American citizen, so upon being prepared to ship out to war in the China-Burma-India Theater of war he was duly sworn in as a US citizen.

After the war my father like many other Albanian immigrants in Worcester saved up enough money to open up his own neighborhood store and luncheonette. He and my mother met at an AANO (Albanian American National Organization) dance in Worcester and were soon married. As youngsters both my sister and I spent many years in the luncheonette, growing up and working there with my mother and father and learning the values of hard work, but at the same time being instilled by both of our parent with the message that education would be our door to better opportunities. Like most of the children of Albanian immigrants who were my friends, we went on to college and other higher education based on the encouragement we received from our parents who had nothing but the highest expectations for both of us.

When I first began practicing family medicine in Worcester my practice saw many members of the Albanian community, but at that time in 1982 they were all either second generation like me, or immigrants who had been in the US for many years. With the fall of communist regime in 1990, I finally had an opportunity to travel to Albania with Dr. Robert Harizi and Dr. Llambi Adams (deceased) (both Albanian decent physicians practicing in Worcester) and there I met the many aunts, uncles and cousins that my parents had left behind. Though I had never met any of them before, the bond was immediate and emotional.

In the next year as the borders of Albania opened up for the first time in 50 years some of those family members did visit here in the US. At the same time there was a large new population of immigrants arriving in Worcester, and some of them found their way to me when they were looking for a doctor. Unfortunately my very rusty Albanian language skills did not always allow me to understand everything they were saying but over the years as their English got better and I learned more Albanian again we managed to communicate.

At the same time I have begun to see the experiences of my parent and grandparents playing out again in a new generation of Albanian immigrants. The children of these immigrants have now begun attending colleges and some to enroll in medical schools and I have even had the chance to have some pass through our Family Medicine Residency Training program.

I am left with a sense of continued pride in our shared Albanian heritage, and the knowledge that, for many Albanians, gaining higher education and contributing to the betterment of the society in which they live is the same ongoing tradition that I learned from my family years ago.

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MMS NEW PRESIDENT

Professional Biography

Dennis M. Dimitri M.D., F.A.A.F.P., is a Clinical Associate Professor and Vice Chair of the Department of Family Medicine & Community Health at UMass Memorial Medical Center and UMass Medical School. In his role as vice chair, he has oversight responsibility for all clinical services delivered in the department while still maintaining his own clinical practice of Family Medicine. He joined the department in his current role in 2006, after almost 25 years in private practice in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Dr. Dimitri has a long history of participation with the Massachusetts Medical Society. He served, as Vice President last year, has been a member of the House of Delegates since 1989, and a member of a number of committees with emphasis on issues of advocacy, legislation and regulation, and physician workforce. He has also served as

an officer of the Worcester District Medical Society and chaired its legislative committee. In 2011, he was honored with the Worcester District Medical Society's Lifetime Achievement Award.

He is a fellow of the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) and a Past President of the Massachusetts academy of Family Physicians (MassAFP). He remains involved in the activities of the Mass AFP, serving as a Massachusetts delegate to the Congress of Delegates of the AAFP. In 2013, he was honored by the MassAFP as the Family Physician of the Year.

He has also been appointed to serve at various times on the Massachusetts Medicaid Delivery Model Advisory Committee, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services Patient Centered Medical Home Pilot Coordinating Council, and the Massachusetts Healthcare Workforce Advisory Council.

Active in his community, Dr. Dimitri is a former vice chair of the board of trustees of Clark University in Worcester and served for eight years as a founding trustee of the board of UMass Memorial Health Care. In 2011 he was inducted into the Worcester Boys and Girls Club Hall of Fame for his philanthropic efforts in support of the club.

Dr. Dimitri attended Clark University and received his M.D. at George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences in Washington, D.C. He completed his residency training in Family Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. He resides in Worcester.



AAMS Executive Director Adela Agolli, DMD (right), Dr. Dennis Dimitri (center), Elonia Dishnica, PharmD

By: Aseda Tena

PhD Graduate Student/ Research Scientist
Massachusetts General Hospital/ Harvard Medical School



*Gentian Lluri MD, PhD
3rd President of AAMS
hosts of formal dinner in
honor of Dennis Dimitri
MD, FAAFP on
Saturday, March 21,
2015 in Boston,
Massachusetts*



FIRST ALBANIAN PRESIDENT TO VISIT U.S. HOSPITAL

On May 9, 2015 Albanian President, Mr. Bujar Nishani, First Lady, Mrs. Odeta Nishani, Albanian Ambassador in United Nations, Mr. Ferit Hoxha and other Albanian dignitaries visited the Acquavella Heart Valve Center at New York Presbyterian Hospital, New York, NY.

Mr. Nishani and his crew were hosted by surgical team of this center, Dr. Karl Krieger, Dr. Arash Salemi, Dr. Lindita Çoku and representatives of International Affairs and Relations of the institution. The purpose of this visit was: to expose the highest official of a small country with the latest surgical interventions and procedures performed in the heart valves in a highly ranked US hospital, to share ideas and opinions in how such modern techniques can be safely and slowly introduced in countries like Albania and other Albanian populated countries of Balkan Peninsula which share similar healthcare challenges, to discuss financial pros and cons faced to patient, hospitals and government from such high end technologies, and build bridges of mutual cooperation between Albanian and American Cardiothoracic Surgeons who perform these procedures.

Guests were taken first to the Atrium Hall of 4th Floor where a breakfast and relaxed meeting were held between both groups. Mr. President and his team were first impressed with the architecture of the hospital itself and especially of this hall where sections of the old historic hospital were fused with the modern section build in. This entire floor has costed the hospital 100 million USD. Then discussion geared towards Albanian Healthcare system and its challenges, especially diseases of the cardiovascular system and newly introduced interventions in the heart through small catheters that deliver prosthetic valves with great precision in its anatomic positions. Such procedures known as TAVI (Trans Aortic Valve Implantation) deploy bioprosthetic valves not only in the Aortic position but in the Mitral and Pulmonic one, not only in the native valves, but in the previous surgically placed bioprosthetic valves (otherwise called valve-in-valve), not only through vessels in the lower extremities but as well via vessels in the upper extremities and directly via the tip of the heart or the Aorta itself. A highly trained team of Intervention Cardiologist and Cardiac Surgeons perform the intervention in the Hybrid OR and they both follow up the patient post procedure as a team. Albanian hospitals (neither public nor private hospitals) do not perform such procedures, the Heart Team concept is not in practice and public overall is not aware these techniques exist. Then Mr. Nishani and his team were taken around, in the Cardio-Thoracic Surgery Intensive Care Unit (CTS ICU) where Dr. Natalia Ivascu a cardiac anesthesiologist and intensivist led them around each patient room and to the bedside of a patient who had TAVI performed a day before. Patient was doing very well clinically and was planned to be transferred to step down unit (SDU) on that day. This minimally invasive approach is indicated in high risk and inoperable patients who face higher rate of Major Adverse Complication Events (MACE) if they undergo sternotomy for valve replacement. The hybrid approach expands to repair of heart valves, coronary artery bypass grafting and in placing coronary stents (in one or two stage model) and aortic arch surgeries. Columbia campus (where I was specialized in Hybrid Cardiac Surgery) is the one of only two or three centers in the country where the surgical portion and the coronary stenting are performed in a single stage. Hybrid Cardiac Surgery results in small incisions, less pain, quicker recovery time and a high level of patient satisfaction. In the long run the cost is far lower than the conventional approach. The venues in performing hybrid cardiac surgery for either valve and/or coronary artery diseases are multiple. Improvement of technology in stent and transcatheter valve design combined with the use of robotic device give us hope for a bright and unquestionable future. The tour encompassed in few sections of the floor where all services for treatment of cardiovascular diseases were located: cardiac care unit (CCU), inpatient cardiac surgery and cardiology wards, cardiac cath labs, hybrid OR and Acquavella Heart Valve Center.

An unforgettable part of the tour was the visit on the 14th Floor of the hospital where international patients come from around the world to be treated for conditions that required high level of expertise and experience. The affluence of this ward and the picturesque view of Manhattan from this level were not left without positive comments from the visiting guests.

The visit was concluded with a final tour at the premises of the Weill Cornell Medical College of Cornell University as one of the medical schools affiliated with New York Presbyterian Hospital, beside the College of Physicians and Surgeon of Columbia University in the City of New York. This visit was a great success for both parties. Upon departure of Mr. Nishani, Albanian President and Dr. Krieger, Surgical Director of Acquavella Heart Valve Center exchanged genuine warmhearted messages and expressed gratitude to each other for making this day a mutual experience.



Mr. Bujar Nishani, Albanian President visits Acquavella Heart Valve Center at New York Presbyterian Hospital, New York, NY.

By: Lindita Çoku, MD

Cardiothoracic Surgery Department
Weill Cornell Medical College/New York Presbyterian Hospital
The University Hospital of Columbia and Cornell
New York, NY, USA

First International Albanian Medical Congress

Dr. Philip Çaushaj and Dr. Lindita Çoku, honored members of AAMS, attended the 1st International Albanian Medical Congress held in Tirana, Albania on April 24 and 25, 2015. An educational event of this scale was made possible through cooperation of the American Hospital, Tirana University Medical Center and the Ministry of Health in Albania. Dr. Çaushaj participated as a panelist and presenter in the sessions of colorectal surgery; Dr. Çoku participated as a discussant in the sessions of cardiothoracic surgery. Participants and presenters were from the Albanian territories of the Balkan Peninsula, United States, Turkey, Italy, Germany, Czech Republic, Ireland, and etc.

President Nishani and the First Lady extended a dinner invitation at their residence in Tirana to both American Surgeons of Albanian heritage, Dr. Çaushaj and Dr. Çoku. The purpose of this invitation for Albanian President was to gain a deeper understanding from the American perspective of the Albanian health system and to show gratitude for AAMS that has raised the standard for the entire Albanian nation.

A day before the launch of medical congress, President Nishani awarded the American Hospital with National Honor for Special Contribution in Albanian Medicine, in both clinical and academic aspects. The American Hospital has operated with its maximal dedication and professionalism in the field of kidney and liver transplantation and cardiac surgery by introducing the most complex and modern techniques not been applied before in Albanian patients and with highest rate of success. In this ceremony, President Nishani awarded Prof. Dr. Neyyir Tuncay Eren, Turkish cardiac surgeon, for his vital contribution in performing successfully difficult procedures and Prof. Dr. Seyit Mehmet Sadik Ersoz, Turkish transplant surgeon who performed successfully the first liver and kidney transplant in Albania at American Hospital.

By: Lindita Çoku, MD
AAMS Honored Member/Co-Founder/1st President

Exclusive Luncheon with the President

On Saturday, May 9, 2015, the Albanian American Medical Society held an exclusive lunch with Albanian President, Mr. Bujar Nishani, and a group of members in the NY Tri-State area. The event took place at Bottega Restaurant, a high scale Albanian run business in the Upper East Side of NYC. The purpose of this event was to discuss emerging medical collaborations between AAMS and public healthcare institutions in the Republic of Albania and introduce members of our society with important figures in Albanian government, the President and First Lady. Albanian Ambassador to the United Nations, Mr. Ferit Hoxha, also accompanied President Nishani.

My impression of this event was not by any means politically influenced. It felt as if a piece of Albania had come with them in this gathering. As our discussion progressed, I felt as if I visited each corner of my beloved country, spoke every dialect, and connected with every Albanian regardless of the religious or political conviction.

Each participant had the opportunity to introduce her/himself to our honored guests in regards to their status in our organization and American health system. Each of us had, as well, the opportunity to address acute and chronic issues the Albanian healthcare has been facing for the past two-plus decades.

As a training young surgeon, the issues I was particularly interested on had to do with the current healthcare condition in Albania. After President Nishani shared his opinion, and gave a glimpse of progress that has been made; I couldn't help but notice that there is still a lot more to be done. I have experienced first hand the struggle of working class Albanians seeking medical care, and all too often been helpless. I have come to the conclusion that healthcare should be a right for every individual rather than a commodity, a notion that President Nishani and I both agree on.

Although I work and live in USA, my goal is that one-day I would be able to give back to my country in the form of healthcare missionary work, specifically in my hometown of Korça. I could have not have had a better opportunity to voice this desire to both President Nishani and Mr. Hoxha, who graciously accepted my idea, and generously offered any logistic help. It was truly an emotional, yet edifying encounter for me and all members of our society.

By: Erion Qaja, DO
PGY3 General Surgery Resident
Wyckoff Heights Medical Center. Brooklyn, NY



Above: Dr. Philip Çaushaj presenting at the First International Albanian Medical Congress



From left to right: Drs. Besnik Kojqiqi, Lindita Çoku, Edvin Prifti, and Arben Kojqiqi at the First International Albanian Medical Congress



President Nishani with AAMS members in New York City

MEMORIAM



Selahedin Ahmet Velaj, PhD
Born 12/15/1922 in Vlora, Albania
Died 01/30/2015 in Greenwich, CT USA

Dr. Selahedin Velaj "Selo" joined the Albanian American Medical Society on July 23, 2011 as a senior member in support of the mission and his son's contribution to Albanian Medical Cause. Dr. Richard Drini Velaj's life was cut short in a tragic accident at his home in Greenwich, CT in October 2010. Selo found comfort and support at AAMS after the loss of his son as witnessed in the letters he would write to us time to time.

Selo was born in Vlora, Albania where he attended elementary school and spent his childhood. He was one of the most distinguished anticommunist activists of the youth division at "Balli Kombetar" movement fighting as well against Albanian occupation from Italians and Germans.

In November 24, 1944 Selo escaped to Italy through the northern city of Shkodra, together with index members and leaders of "Balli Kombetar" organization hoping to return and fight the communist regime, which claimed victory in Albania during those last days of WWII. He was a good friend of Dr. Agim Leka and Dr. Ramazan Turdiu who, like him, escaped Albania to Italy the same time and for the same reason. The three of them eventually settled in the US and worked together throughout their life on different projects as part of the Albanian Diaspora activism. In Italy, Selo signed up at "Spallazani" Liceum in Reggio Emiliat then attended the University of Modena.

In 1949 Selo and his Italian wife Rina immigrated to Canada.

In 1954 they immigrated to the United States of America.

In 1957 he was awarded a Bachelor degree in Science *cum laude* from City University of New York.

In 1966 he was awarded from the American College of Life Underwriters the title of C.L.U. in the field of Life Insurance.

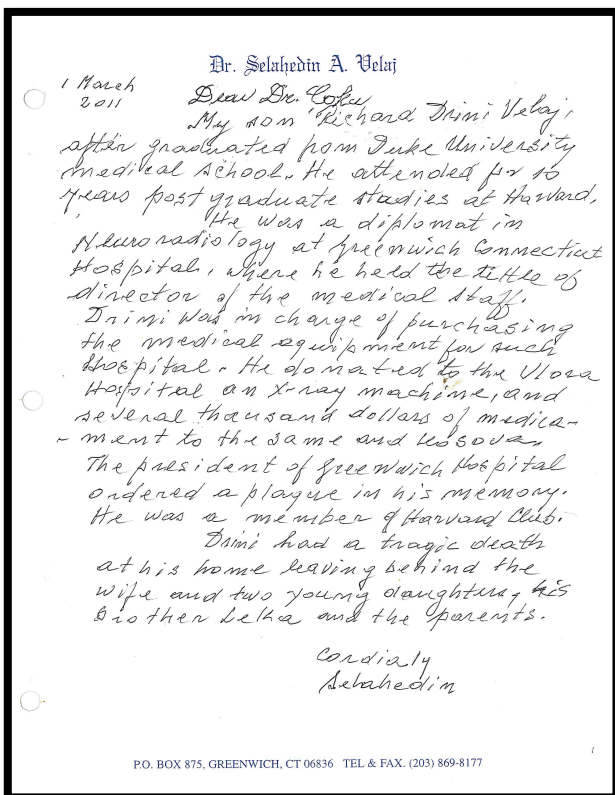
Shortly after he became a member of the International Association of Financial Planners.

In 1973 Selo obtained the academic title of Ph.D. *summa cum laude* from the University of Naples, Italy specializing in Albanian and Romance Languages and Literature.

We find his articles published in the Life Insurance and Financial Planning magazines beside books translated vice versa from English to Albanian. Lately, he published his biography titled "Legendary Vlonjat in America" with a well-selected photo collection of his family and friends from both sides of the ocean.

Selo was one of the strongest and oldest supporter of AAMS, he attended the 1st and the 2nd GALA Dinner events, the 1st Scientific Session in Washington D.C. and every activity our organization held in NY C. His presence added flavor to our gatherings and his humor and wisdom will be a major legacy for all members of our society. In us he saw Drini and in our organization he saw Albanians prosper intellectually as a body in the land of opportunities. His discipline in getting the highest level of graduate degree beside fulfilling the duties of a great family man, a diaspora activist and always being a proud Vlonjat is very inspiring. He never forgot where he came from and what took him to be so far in life. Although he never agreed to stop smoking, he reached 92 years of healthy life. He left behind his wife Rina, his son Alexander (Leka), granddaughters Carol and Grace (Richard's daughters), and two daughters-in-law.

By: Sihana Sela, PA



AAMS UPDATES

AAMS Networking Event

On June 26, 2015 the first AAMS networking event for Albanian Medical professionals took place in NYC. We were excited to welcome over 40 guests from a number of different areas of the medical field ranging from physician assistants, medical doctors to medical residents and registered nurses, etc. Special thanks and appreciation are directed to Dr. Philip Çaushaj and Dr. Samy McFarlane for joining and supporting our organization and all of its members.

We are very pleased with the turnout as well as the positive feedback that was provided by the attendees and we look forward to organizing many more events like this one. Please follow the Albanian American Medical Society Facebook page to learn about AAMS activities and upcoming events.



By: Ilda Boholli, MPH
AAMS Treasurer



AAMS Board of Directors Meeting Overview

On Sunday, May 3, 2014 at 5:00pm, AAMS held a board of directors meeting with full attendance. The topics discussed included updating the board of directors' contact information; filling in the position of Historian on the steering committee; planning of the upcoming events of the visit of Albanian President Bujar Nishani in NYC; updating the AAMS website as it is the main source of information for current members and recruitment of new members; updating AAMS banking and finances; and updating the membership list.

On Tuesday, June 30, 2015 at 10:00pm, a board of directors meeting was held with full attendance. The topics discussed included the success of the June 26, 2015 networking event and how to continue such events in the future; the website work is in progress and is high priority; opportunities for Albanian scientists to work in a research lab through AAMS members; financial status and dues updates; work on the newsletter for first half of the year; scheduling of the next board meeting that is to occur at the end of summer.

By: Gentian Lluri, MD, PhD
AAMS President



***To increase the cultural and religious competence and sensitivity to members of various faith traditions, AAMS has undertaken an initiative to send an educational message about the more significant holy days of the major faith traditions that are represented across our society, as they occur over the course of the year. We welcome your feedback and input if there are major holidays from your faith tradition that have not been included.**

HAPPY EASTER!

Thursday evening, April 2, 2015 begins the great **Easter Triduum** – the three-day period from Thursday evening through Sunday evening, which is the holiest period of the Christian year. It begins with the Maundy Thursday service commemorating the Last Supper, continues through Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday.

Maundy Thursday (April 2, 2015) is the Thursday before Easter. Christians remember it as the day of the Last Supper in which Jesus instituted the ceremony known as the Eucharist or Holy Communion. The word *maundy* comes from the Latin word “maundatum” which means mandate. It was the command given by Christ at the Last Supper when he washed the disciples’ feet that we should love one another as he loved us through our service and care of one another. He demonstrated that there is nothing too menial when serving others and offering hospitality and care.

Good Friday (April 3, 2015) commemorates Jesus’ crucifixion. Traditionally the most important events in Christianity are the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who Christians believe is the Son of God, and whose life and teachings, is the foundation of Christianity. It is called “Good” because it showed Christ’s great love and sacrifice for humanity. It is a day of mourning in the church. During special Good Friday services Christians meditate on Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross, and what this means for their faith.

Holy Saturday (April 4, 2015) is the day that the great Easter vigil service is held, which is the first Easter service. It takes place in the evening of Holy Saturday. The purpose of the service is for faithful Christians to wait and watch, hopeful and confident, that Christ will return at midnight.

Easter Sunday (April 5, 2015) is the oldest Christian holiday. It commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the most important Christian festival, and the one celebrated with the greatest joy. Churches are filled with flowers, and there are special hymns and songs. Easter is a spring festival that celebrates the central event of the Christian faith: the resurrection of Christ three days after his death by crucifixion. For Christians, the primary meaning of Easter is Jesus’ victory over death. His resurrection symbolizes many things. For some it includes the eternal life that is granted to all who believe in Him. The resurrection of Christ also symbolizes new life, freedom, liberation, and healing.

On behalf of AAMS we wish a Happy, Holy Easter Triduum and Easter Season to all of our Christian members, their families, and patients.

Albanian American Medical Society

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*In loving memory from AAMS,
Selo (at the Second Gala Event with Ilda Boholli, MPH and
Dr. Philip Çaushaj.) will always be remembered.*

"THE FIRST IN THE FRONTIER OF THE ALBANIAN MEDICAL CAUSE SINCE 2008"