

rective surgery, orthotic elements and even wheelchairs. They are unable to go through all the bureaucratic procedures and they just accept their fate. Some of them have not left their homes for years, others even have no separate bed to sleep in, they lie on the floor and they fight for their physical survival every winter. Their families have severe psychological problems, which have been piling up for years, and they live under permanent stress.

In 2001 the Minority Health Problems Foundation started a project for equal access to healthcare services and psychological support to chronically ill and disabled Roma, which has been supported by the Open Society Foundation – Sofia. The key project tasks include:

1. Consulting and seeing patients in their homes and in specialized hospitals in order to ensure timely diagnostics and effective treatment
2. Providing access to rehabilitation treatment for chronically ill and disabled patients
3. Offering psychological support to chronically ill and disabled Roma and their families
4. Preparing documents for certifying the patient's fitness to work or for medical retirement
5. Providing orthotic elements to those who need them
6. Training local Roma medical staff to work with chronically ill and disabled patients and their families
7. Increasing the awareness of disabled people of their specific rights

The project aims at mobilizing potential resources within the Roma community and in the healthcare and social assistance administration in order to provide adequate treatment and rehabilitation of chronically ill and disabled Roma. The main obstacles to achieving this goal are the concealed or manifested discriminatory attitudes, the acquiescence of chronically ill or disabled patients and their families, the dire poverty within the Roma community, the lack of information, and the limited possibilities of the healthcare system to serve chronically ill patients locally.

In the first eight months of the project the interdisciplinary team of the Minority Health Problems Foundation visited 455 patients in 17 regions across the country. All of them were seen and consulted in their homes. The team provided medical and legal information to all affected families. During the on-site visits 51 new cases were identified, 187 Roma patients from all over the country were given the opportunity to be tested and consulted for free at the Medical Academy in Sofia. The Foundation covered the travel expenses for all insolvent patients and helped 109 Roma prepare the necessary documents for certifying their fitness to work and applying for wheelchairs, orthotic elements and toilet chairs. We were left with the impression that because of their disability, their difficult financial situation and the limited access to healthcare services, these patients feel helpless in preparing the necessary documentation. During our visits we talked to general practitioners, local government officials, and heads of local social service departments in order to increase their awareness of the patients' condition and needs. The team also helped prepare 53 protocols to the National Health Insurance Fund for allocating free medication under the existing regulations.

### **Network of Roma Health Mediators**

The severity of health problems within the Roma community, the inadequate medical information and the existence of manifested or concealed discriminatory attitudes towards Roma patients bring out the need for creating a network of Roma medical staff that could act as a mediator between the Roma population and the local healthcare establishments, social services and NGOs in order to improve the access of Roma to healthcare and social assistance. The team of the Minority Health Problems Foundation cooperated with Dr. Pim de Graaf from the international foundation "Spolu" to identify and select Roma mediators who would be trained and would help Roma cope with their health problems. Currently the team has established