

## In Search of Patients

### Perm doctors expand their arsenal for fighting HIV epidemic

Doctors from the regional anti-AIDS center in their fight for patients started recurring to non-traditional methods. Medical specialists write letters to people in need of therapy. "Today our gravest problem is patients' attendance. This is no secret that we treat people diagnosed with drug addiction, and frequently they are incapable of stable adherence to therapy. When people are actively taking drugs and forget about sleeping or eating, they also forget about taking pills. They need long explanations of how important is therapy; they need help in dealing with their problems. This is not easy", - says Elvira Ivanova, head of the clinical department of the Regional Center for AIDS Prevention.

The biggest problems with PLWHA's willingness to accept treatment are encountered in the smallest towns of Perm Region. "Doctors sometimes have to visit patients at home to take tests. To get blood samples from regional towns to the lab in Perm by 11 a.m. they have to visit people at five or six a.m.", - Ivanova says.

Just ten years ago people were scared by AIDS, and HIV infection was considered a particularly dangerous disease. Today medics consider this disease a chronic one and say that with a stable adherence to drug therapy PLWHA can have a normal life as long as any other person. Scientists learned to "control" the virus of immunodeficiency by means of the so called antiretroviral therapy. Taking ARV drugs, a person feels practically well for many years.

If just a year ago only a few dozen patients were receiving necessary drugs, today 629 people are taking the therapy. Approximately the same number of people needs treatment. At the Anti-AIDS Center they assure that virtually all drugs are available. Perm Region is supplied with drugs under two programs: the "Health" National Project and the programs of the "Russian Healthcare" Foundation.

"Another important aspect is the so-called adherence to therapy on the part of PLWHA. This term means patients' readiness to take drugs for many years, continuously. Even before starting to take drugs people are afraid that therapy will not help them or that it will produce negative side effects. It is very difficult to learn taking pills every day, at a certain time, and for the rest of your life" – says Diana, a staff members of the Anti-AIDS Center. She is a peer consultant, a PLWHA. Presence of people who have personal experience of having HIV and whose main profession is living with HIV is one more new initiative in fighting for patients. A peer consultant uses his/her own example to explain why taking drugs is important and therapy is necessary.

Adherence school is the third part of informal approach to treating HIV infection. Such divisions in Anti-AIDS Centers are opening across the entire Russia.

Federal politicians too help fighting HIV infection spread in Perm Region. After making himself known for his fight against corruption in Prikamye area, the State Duma deputy Mikhail Grishankov decided to address another difficult issue. For many years Grishankov works on the problems of drug abuse and HIV spread; he established a resource center "Drug-Free Chelyabinsk Region". The politician promises to start monitoring anti-AIDS activities in our region too.

"We have discussed these issues with Perm specialists. The HIV prevention program among military conscripts that is successfully operating in Chelyabinsk, will be set up in Prikamye area too. Currently we are negotiation with Vladimir Pozner about organizing a Perm-Moscow TV bridge on HIV epidemic issues, but this is still a secret", - Grishankov told Izvestia daily.

Another thing is that for all necessary support PLWHA still have to come to an old building at the corner of Kuibyshev and Pushkin streets. The clinic is way too crowded; right now 7476 patients are

registered with the AIDS Prevention Center; about 650 new HIV infections were identified in 2007. On top of that problem, the clinic had its computers stolen. However, doctors assure that the majority of problems will be resolved when they move to a new building. Construction of a spacious facility on the Cosmonauts Avenue must be completed by December 2007.