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CU tracks HIV in Ukrainian addicts

Two researchers are comparing the efficacy of two interventions among intravenous drug users.

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Odessa, Ukraine - Tatiana winces as blood gushes onto a plastic bench and the floor. Nurse Nadezhda Kolcheva reaches for a small, white container. A drop of blood lands in it. Fifteen minutes later, Tatiana hears news she has dreaded.

"I'm HIV-positive," the 43-year-old drug addict says, her eyes puffy. "I don't feel anything right now, nothing. I prepared myself for this result, but right now, I can't feel." Tatiana, who has used drugs for more than eight years, is part of a four-year study by the University of Colorado's Health Sciences Center to track and reduce the spread of HIV among injecting drug users in Ukraine.

Targeting three large cities - Odessa, Kiev and Donetsk/Makiyivka - the Colorado researchers are comparing the effectiveness of two interventions among 1,800 drug users, 600 from each city. By the project's end, the researchers hope to present a plan to the Ukrainian government on how to fight the virus' spread among drug users.

Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, has one of the fastest-growing HIV/AIDS rates in the world. One percent of the adult population, or 500,000 people, are already infected. If trends continue, that number is expected to grow to as high as 3 percent in the next 20 years. "There will come a time when that bomb hits that it's so exponential, you can't stop it," says Tom Brewster, a CU associate professor of psychiatry, who was in Ukraine recently to visit with the three Ukrainian nongovernmental organizations participating in the project. "Society is going to implode."

Brewster first became involved with Ukraine in 1999. A colleague called asking for help assessing how to set up drug education and treatment programs there. "I said, 'Where's Ukraine?'" he recalls. Brewster soon brought a team of educators to train Ukrainian narcologists and health officials about treatment methods effective in the U.S. One of the people he invited was Robert E. Booth, professor of psychiatry at CU's School of Medicine and a renowned expert in HIV/AIDS, who is Brewster's partner in the HIV study. The educators talked about sophisticated treatments but soon realized Ukrainians weren't interested in the programs and there was no money to finance them.

What Ukraine really needed wasn't drug treatment, but AIDS prevention.

Since 1987, Booth had worked in Denver using a so-called indigenous leader outreach model, in which recovering substance abusers locate and contact users who inject their drugs. Because outreach workers know the drug culture and its unwritten rules, they can win the trust of users. The country has received significant funding from the West to fight HIV/AIDS. It is projects such as the CU study, however, that seem to be making the biggest difference in how drug addicts modify their behavior to lower the virus' spread.

Brewster and Booth began their pilot study of 300 people in the summer of 2002. They set up ethics review boards to protect confidentiality and decreed that outreach workers be drug-free.

The pilot study found that 40 percent of drug users tested positive for HIV, and seven died over a six-month period.

The two men got the go-ahead for the four-year project, and testing began in June of this year. They expect to visit Ukraine three or four times a year to check on progress.

Tatiana, the drug addict who had her blood drawn, had met her outreach worker several weeks before near a bus stop, a gathering place for drug addicts. Tatiana decided to participate partly to find out whether she had HIV and partly for the \$2 she would receive for her time. Before interviews begin, participants take a urine test to check for drugs. They then take an HIV test, receive counseling and education, and identify themselves on a so-called risk hierarchy scale. Half the addicts will meet regularly with outreach workers until the fifth month. They will be interviewed at six and 12 months to determine whether they have changed their behavior.

Tatiana isn't sure how she became infected. But it might have been from the way many Ukraine addicts prepare their drug of choice.

That drug is shyrka, an opiate made of poppy heads and stems that are finely ground and cooked over a fire with alcohol-based liquids. Although the practice is less common today, addicts used to drip a thin layer of blood on top of the mixture to help particles sink to the bottom of the pan. Shyrka was produced in large batches, then transferred into syringes. Even if an addict used clean needles, the drug may have already been infected from the blood. Tatiana says she now worries about how to protect her 19-year-old son, who lives with her, from HIV. She says she hasn't had sexual contact in the past several months, although she admits to shooting up almost daily. She says she uses clean needles and doesn't share hers. The information she received during the counseling session should help her make the right choices now, she says.

Brewster and Booth say they feel they are in a race against time. "With the AIDS epidemic, it's going to decimate the society, so we've got to do something to try to help the people," Brewster says. "I'm not trying to make us sound like a bunch of life savers, although that is our objective. But I would like the community here to say, 'Wow, we've got to look at that.'"

World AIDS Day

Events Wednesday in Colorado:

DENVER

Women and Girls in Colorado, a panel presentation at 9 a.m., will explore care and treatment, prevention, and what it's like to be a woman living with HIV. Open to the public, but you must bring photo ID and be admitted through security at Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 1600 Broadway, seventh floor.

World AIDS Day Prayer Concert will take place from 4 to 8 p.m. at Metropolitan Community Church of the Rockies, 960 Clarkson St.

Denver for Africa and other HIV/AIDS organizations will hold a candlelight vigil from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. outside the Denver Museum of Nature & Science in City Park.

Our Savior's Lutheran Church, 915 E. Ninth Ave., will host "Memorials and Hope; Remembering and Going On," at 7 p.m.

AURORA

An interfaith group will hold its second annual World's AIDS Day event at 7 p.m. at Parkview Congregational Church, 12444 E. Parkview Drive.

BOULDER

The Boulder County AIDS Project will hold a candlelight vigil on the south terrace of the University Memorial Center on the University of Colorado campus from 5 to 6:30 p.m.

COLORADO SPRINGS

Partners for Life, Southern Colorado AIDS Project, Pikes Peak Gay and Lesbian Community Center, and Metropolitan Community Church will host a remembrance and celebration at 7 p.m. at Pikes Peak Metropolitan Church, 1102 S. 21st St.

FORT COLLINS

The Northern Colorado AIDS Project, Colorado State University and Women's Center of Larimer County will host a remembrance and celebration at CSU's Sutherland Events Garden at 6:30 p.m.