

Third program produced jointly with the "Echo of Moscow" radio in Perm

The mass media impact on public perception of HIV/AIDS issues and on the way people living with HIV/AIDS are treated

June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005

"Talk to America" interactive programs with guest experts are broadcast daily, Monday through Friday, at 9 p.m. Moscow time. You can also listen to their recording on our Web-site after they were broadcast.

Guests of the program:

Valery Mikhailovich Zubov, State Duma Deputy, First Deputy to the Chair of Committee on Credit Organizations and Financial Markets, Member of Deputies' inter-factional anti-AIDS Working Group

Alec Khachatryan, Director, Russian Regional Program, TPAA international NGO

Pavel Sheremet, TV Presenter, TV Channel One, Head of the Special News Projects Department, script writer for the new documentary "AIDS: Death with an Open Date"

and

Gregory Davidson, President, DavidsonRadio Company, New York, NY

Program presented by Inna Dubinskaya in Washington, DC, and Olga Andreyeva in Perm, Russia

On October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2004, in Moscow the first Eurasian summit of media leaders gathered to discuss anti-AIDS strategies, where media leaders from Russia, Ukraine and the CIS committed to applying media power to combat the epidemic growth. The summit was organized by the Transatlantic Partners Against AIDS NGO, the Gazprom-Media and the Global Anti-AIDS Media Initiative which is a joint UNAIDS, Kaiser Family Foundation and UN Public Information Department project.

This Tuesday, June 14<sup>th</sup>, Head of the US Department of Health and Social Security arrived to Moscow. As he meets Russian government officials, one of the priority issues on their agenda will be the fight of HIV/AIDS. How can the media influence the public opinion on the HIV/AIDS issues and the fight against this disease? What are the Stop-SPID media campaign results?

These and related questions were discussed by guests of the Talk to America program.

VOA: Tina Hoff, VP of the Kaiser Family Foundation, just came back from New-York where she attended a seminar on media role in shaping public opinion on HIV/AIDS. She said that the Kaiser Foundation appreciates the Russian media contribution: "This campaign is hugely successful in Russia; as of today, over 35 media companies have joined the Russian anti-AIDS media partnership. This is a good model for other world regions. Public reaction to the initial stage of this campaign was extremely positive."

What do you think is the most important in media efforts to affect the public opinion on HIV/AIDS issues?

Pavel Sheremet: The most important is to cover the HIV/AIDS issues with the focus on dispelling all the myths and fears that exist in popular consciousness in Russia. The society is overwhelmed by these fears and myths and so it is not ready to address the HIV/AIDS problem, gives no assistance to the people living with HIV/AIDS, and on the contrary tries to cut them off with an iron curtain.

Gregory Davidson: This is a basic literacy campaign that the mass media should organize in order to provide objective assessment of what is happening and how to fight it. I am a strong supporter of prevention, and I believe that no one can help better than the media in preventing further spread of this terrible disaster.

"Echo of Moscow" radio: A Russian Media Partnership against AIDS recently has been organized in Russia. It includes such leading companies as Gazprom-Media, Prof-Media, ROL, CTC TV, RIA "Novosti" and SK Press Publishing House. This media partnership is an unprecedented initiative to disseminate information about AIDS by means of direct public service announcements on TV and radio, and through print products, Internet, briefings for journalists, editors and producers in order to increase volume and quality of AIDS coverage.

Which specific steps has the Russian media partnership against AIDS made so far, in almost twelve months that elapsed since the agreement was reached at the Moscow summit?

Pavel Sheremet: Russian media broke through the information blockade of HIV/AIDS issues in the last year. In December our Channel broadcast the first TV marathon where the activists who work for anti-AIDS organizations showed themselves to the multimillion audiences and told them about their lives and the HIV/AIDS problem in Russia. The full-length documentary "AIDS: Death with an Open Date" was broadcast on our TV channel in May. Today, jointly with the Internews and the Channel One several TV marathons are organized in a number of Russian cities, and documentaries will be filmed in the process that show how

people with HIV/AIDS live in the Russian regions. Activists of anti-AIDS organizations are actively trying to reach the Russian government and public officials to increase public awareness of the HIV/AIDS issues. These actions are quite widely covered by the independent media. There is, however, one problem here; in the aftermath of the "Orange revolution" in Ukraine and the "Rose revolution" in Georgia such actions are perceived as revolutionary manifestations, they are suppressed by the authorities with maximum toughness and ignored by the official media. Nevertheless, we can say that the overall media situation in Russia shows that the process of ignoring HIV/AIDS problem is already stopped, and the problem itself ceases to be an exclusive domain of medical professionals and officials, but requires a broad involvement of the general public.

Valery Zubov: In my view, there are two main areas where the media can help to stop AIDS. The first is to inform the broad public that unfortunately we missed the point where the AIDS epidemic in Russia had started. It started 5 years ago, and although Academician Pokrovsky warned about it back then, no sufficient measures were taken, so now we are faced with the epidemic as a fact. The second is that today it is necessary to accurately explain, persuade that we are going to live side by side with these people; we have to do everything to save our children from being infected. Even according to the official data today we have 300 thousand infections, and according to the unofficial data – three times as much, up to a million. We have to live with these people, and we must create a tolerant environment, these are the two issues that the media must help us to resolve.

VOA: According to the Kaiser Foundation, 71% of Americans get their information on HIV/AIDS from the media, and 9% from medical professionals. One of the American participants of the global informational anti-AIDS campaign is the Viacom media giant. Answering the question about the most effective approaches to this campaign, Imara Jones, the Viacom anti-AIDS initiative

Director, said: "At the end of each HIV/AIDS program we give the phone number. Our HIV/AIDS web-site is visited by millions of Internet users... We disseminate millions of brochures on the subject via this site."

Is the Russian media partnership satisfied with the way the media inform the public on HIV/AIDS?

Alec Khachatrian of TPAA coordinates the Russian media partnership initiative. This initiative belongs to our partners – media organizations themselves. The level of dissemination of these materials is unprecedented for Russia at the moment. Presently anti-AIDS PSAs are being broadcast on 8 TV channels, 9 radio networks, and published in a number of print media. Nevertheless, we face certain problems.

Valery Zubov: Unfortunately, in shaping public opinion the decisive role is played by the governmental media, where the government holds the controlling interest. Private TV and radio channels are taking part in the promotion, but their intensity of course is lower than that of Channels One and Two. Being a parliament deputy, I have to admit with deep regret (although this is good for the media) that in three years of direct budget funding of anti-AIDS programs, the amounts allocated from the state budget are equal to the amounts spent by private companies on promoting anti-AIDS measures. The state, the government and the parliament are clearly behind the private sector on this, and today the main role in attracting public attention belongs to the private media and business community, since they understand how their operation will be affected by increased number of young people infected with HIV.

GA: Channel One has broadcast Pavel Sheremet's documentary "AIDS: Death with an Open Date". Unlike TV series with innocent titles that **Imara** Jones refers to speaking about Viacom programs, your documentary title may sound scary.

Why have you selected such a title for your very optimistic film? How do you think your film can be useful to the society?

Pavel Sheremet: The title might be not the best one and not reflect the content in full, but we had to follow the fashion that is dominant on the Russian TV. Perhaps the world channels are suffering from the same ailment too – fighting for the ratings, for the viewership. This is why one of the requirements for all programs on national channels is to have a compelling, teasing title, and it is very difficult to find an appropriate title for a documentary on AIDS that would attract viewers. In fact, this is a documentary about people living with HIV/AIDS who reveal their faces and tell their stories for the first time, and discuss the HIV/AIDS problem. I agree that governmental channels present the HIV/AIDS problem somewhat differently from the private, independent media. Mainly this is because a huge part of the blame for the epidemic rests with the government and with the governmental officials. When we cover the HIV/AIDS in Russia, we cannot ignore these officials, we must speak about this, we must point at the vile position taken by the officials responsible for contracting pharmaceutical companies and approving medical programs; we must speak about the vile position taken by the government in respect to the HIV-positive people. And of course, we must admit that this is not exactly welcome on governmental channels in present-day Russia.

Phone call from St.Petersburg: Many people today are wary of AIDS patients. This happens because psychologists who work with AIDS patients are actively spreading their opinions on how dangerous these people are and that they had contracted AIDS because of their immoral life style. The media for some reason give these psychologists the right to freely promote their views. What can be done to tackle this situation?

Alec Khachatrian: As for psychologists – this is the question of training medical personnel and social workers in proper methods of working with people living with HIV and in proper ways to inform about them. This is very important. Unfortunately, at the moment in some cases these are medics and social workers who are spreading stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV. Last year, jointly with a number of governmental agencies, the AIDS Center, UNICEF and Russian researchers, we investigated the situation with children born to and abandoned by HIV-positive mothers. We discovered that one of the main reasons why women with HIV do not register in time with maternity clinics is precisely their discrimination and stigma at the medical institutions.

GA: How can legislators assist in changing this situation and in providing electorate with accurate information in order to overcome stigma and unfounded fears?

VZ: They should provide as much as possible of accurate facts and teach people how to live with these facts. Three years ago 95 percent of people who contracted HIV infection were people with that very different sexual orientation. Today this number is 65%. The rest are the people with a standard, average life style; with conservative, widely spread views. This must be said. Also what must be said is that 90 percent of those who today live with this virus were infected in the past 5 years. The number of people who get infected by a variety of means grows exponentially, and today it is especially important to explain that we are living and will continue living side by side with these people. We have to develop norms of living, norms of hygiene, norms of behavior in work place and in private life, otherwise we will become incensed against each other, and nothing good will come out of it. Media are the main source of disseminating positive information which helps us to find our way in the current situation.

GA: How do you disseminate this positive information? Valery Zubov said that the problem is not in high-risk groups but in high-risk behavior of people who do not belong to the high-risk groups. How do you explain this to the listeners?

GD: I think that the Russian population in America lives in "peace and quiet" in this respect. But these words also can have a negative connotation. We are the first news organization who started some kind of action in this area. This is a sensitive subject, all people have fears, and it is very difficult to explain that the reality is very different from the stereotype that was promoted for years without a right approach. But I believe that this is not a hopeless cause, and any self-respecting news organization must not ignore global problems.

EMP: The media partnership initiative is aimed at increasing public awareness of the HIV/AIDS issues through the mass media. Frequently these are journalists themselves who spread inaccurate information and misinform their audiences on the HIV/AIDS issues. Besides PSAs, TV series and documentaries, the partnership is also training journalists. Will you tell us about these programs?

AKh: Currently over 40 media companies in Russia and in the neighboring countries participate in the media campaign. This is very important because this gives us an opportunity to work not only with the companies, but also with their journalists. In the years 2004 and 2005 we conducted a number of seminars, both on the national level, in Moscow, and in the regions. This program is supported by the Kaiser Family Foundation – the largest US organization which is engaged in research and advocacy regarding HIV/AIDS. I am happy to say that thanks to the assistance of our partners, in particular, the assistance provided by Valery Zubov and our partners in Krasnoyarsk region, we succeeded in establishing productive relationships with a number of Krasnoyarsk media organizations. We will hold a seminar on these issues in Krasnoyarsk for all the leading regional media.



Phone call from Krivoy Rog, Ukraine: At the upcoming G8 summit the issue of debt relief for the poorest countries will be addressed. These countries are subjected to AIDS the most. Would it be right to associate their debt relief with increased investment of these countries' own funds in AIDS combat?

VZ: Frankly, we are speaking about bad debt that these countries cannot repay due to their economic and financial situation, although frequently due to corruption level too. Debt relief is necessary. I do not know if the debt relief was associated with their own increased spending on anti-AIDS programs; I think this sounds like a reasonable idea.

We asked **Imara** Jones how they can make sure that Viacom activities are effective and that the public responds to the anti-AIDS campaign effort. This is what he said: "Our success is based on taking into account various demographics in working with various population groups. This is essential. At the end of each program on HIV/AIDS we give a phone number. Sometimes we receive up to one thousand calls in the first minute. Millions visit our Web-site on HIV/AIDS... We distribute millions of brochures on this subject via our Web-site."

: In Russia we too have numerous hot lines, Web-site and brochures on HIV/AIDS. Our program today also belongs to those that inform people about HIV/AIDS issues. Has the Russian media partnership succeeded in making information in the media available to the broad public? Or is this designated for specific population groups and experts?

AKh: The media partnership has one common logotype "Stop SPID" and a common web-site [www.stopspid.ru](http://www.stopspid.ru). The web-site is visited by a rather large number of users, mainly young people. This is an important indicator for us. We constantly try to improve the web-site. As for the campaign outreach, here are a

few numbers. From January to April this year our campaign on TV was placing approximately 20 PSAs per day. Approximately 20% of them were broadcast in prime time, between 8 and 10 p.m. This is a very important indicator, as I believe everyone understands. Basically no other country in the world has succeeded in reaching this percentage; usually it equals two or three, no more than 5 percent. PSAs on the radio were broadcast approximately 20 times per day as well. Today we are working on the second wave of our campaign that is aimed not only at the wider audience, but also at the people living with HIV, and it deals with fighting stigma and discrimination. I am pleased to say here that for the first time in our country people living with HIV from St.Petersburg have agreed to co-operate with us, we are very grateful to them for their courage and for agreeing to be filmed for PSAs that were produced for the second wave of our media campaign.

GA: Indeed, they were given a platform. Do media benefit economically from participating in such a campaign?

VZ: First, all journalists, all media professionals are living in this country, side by side with these people, contact these people in public transportation, in hallways, in courtyards, at meetings, at parties. Therefore simply as citizens, as people they are interested in reducing the number of HIV infections, the more of them, the more they are exposed to being infected themselves. Second, working in the media is a business, and if our young labor force will have too many people infected with HIV, this will affect business as a whole, reduce production, inhibit communications. Government will have to increase spending on treating these patients, on maintaining them in a normal state. In all respects, personal as well as commercial, the media benefit from promoting safe life styles under conditions of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

GD: Our radio is a purely commercial enterprise. I think that at least 50 percent of our audiences are people who listen only to the Russian-language radio and read only Russian newspapers. If we do not give them the necessary information, no one else will do this for us. Second, quite correctly it was said that it is impossible to separate business from social importance of the media. I believe that this is especially important for immigrants who have limited access to information. For example, there are only two Russian radio stations in New York. With appropriate effort we will achieve expected results, at the very least, people will stop being afraid to live side by side with HIV infections.

Va-Bank TV Company, Orel, Russia: Does Channel One have employees with HIV/AIDS?

Pavel Sheremet: I think, yes. Because the AIDS epidemic in Russia acquired such a scale, statistically everyone who takes metro or a bus every day must encounter HIV-positive people. We all know people who live with HIV but are afraid to confess it mainly because of our own fears. My neighbor – an entrepreneur – accidentally discovered that his assistant, a 19-year old kid, not a drug user, not a gay, but somewhat promiscuous, is diagnosed with HIV. When we were filming our documentary, we discovered total silence and total illiteracy of people, of doctors, of public officials. Many are still sure that AIDS is affecting only people with high-risk life styles. In fact, epidemic spread among drug users is curbed. Now the epidemic in Russia is spreading through sexual contacts. There was no sex in the Soviet Union, but there is sex in Russia, but no safe sex, and the word "condom" is still considered indecent, some kind of indecent tool of sexual life. This is why the epidemic is acquiring such a terrifying scale, and it is absolutely meaningless to stonewall it.

GA: Valery Zubov, you have visited the USA and met people living with HIV. You spoke to people who take care of them and communicate with them. What is your impression of how such people live in America?

VZ: America had encountered this problem 10 years earlier than Russia. There is certain immunity, certain degree of tolerance developed in America in respect to these people. People realize that this disease is no different from many other diseases. There are numerous other diseases which we do not treat with the same horror, but which are much more dangerous in terms of contracting, like TB. Situation in Russia, unfortunately, is very grave indeed. We have missed these 10 years indeed, and we have to catch up as fast as possible in terms of medical research, organizing treatment and developing tolerance. This is what I saw and felt in America.

EMP: Recently the State Duma was seriously debating the question that two or three years of promoting safe sex, broadcasting PSAs, and implementing governmental programs, brought no result, and it is time to start promoting virginity. Nevertheless, social scientists show that any cultural change takes at least a generation to take root. Why?

VZ: I think, the answer is obvious. People have learned that all these shamanic methods, spells or exotic suggestions concerning virginity... and what do you do with men then? These suggestions will deprive life of any meaning whatsoever. We live our life as it is given to us, with all its joys and all its problems. AIDS is not something unheard of and new as a fact. People were suffering from plague in the Middle Ages, which devastated half of Europe; suffering from pox – and overcame them. We are confronted with a problem, and we need to understand honestly how to combat this problem. With medical science, with money, with the media, with our changed behavior. This disease can be overcome, we have to understand and admit this, while silence, prudery and coquetry only make the

problem worse. Eventually we will have to live with the HIV infection for a long time, and then, I believe, a way to overcome it will be discovered.

EMP: AIDS issues are frequently tied with human rights. Speaking of protecting rights of the people living with HIV/AIDS, we can say that this issue is frequently ignored. However, they are faced with stigma both in their workplace and in private life. Even doctors are often refusing to treat them. Do you think that the media can change this? And should they – until quite recently they were using a different strategy and tactics: frightening people out. Would it not be better to continue this strategy – because the fear felt by healthy people is justified by the fact that no cure for HIV/AIDS has been discovered yet?

AKh: International experience shows that the intimidation tactics brings no results. Perhaps many would like to close our eyes and imagine that we are living not in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but in the 15<sup>th</sup> or in the 126<sup>th</sup>, when people's lives were determined by moral requirements almost one hundred percent. Our time is different, people are more independent economically, the role of the family has changed too, the role of public institutions has changed completely; the role of the church has changed too, and has decreased substantially. We need to accept this reality and learn how to live in this new society in a new way.

Valery Zubov: Ten years ago we had an opportunity to stop AIDS. We belong to the so called "second wave" countries. AIDS came to us with a ten-year delay. In the last four years we experienced a sharp increase of HIV infections. All this will manifest itself in five years. Experts estimate that we have approximately one million infections. Do you want to corner one million people? Do you want to make their life, their situation hopeless? You think, they will not do anything in response? If you deprive them of work, of access to drugs, of their future, if they will be afraid to go out for fear of being beaten up? If they know all this, they will retaliate! We are not talking about five, ten or one hundred thousand, we are

talking about hundreds of thousands! So, alas, we are doomed to live with this problem in the society and find a radical solution for it as soon as possible.

Phone call from Moscow: It feels sometimes that discussions about AIDS are too theoretical. Can the program participants describe the situation of an infected person, what s/he thinks, what s/he feels?

Pavel Sheremet: The first and predominant reaction felt by a person who just learned about being HIV-positive is shock and despair, of course. One of the myths is that all drug users are HIV-infected, while it frequently happens that people begin using drugs only after they learn about being infected, precisely because they feel hopeless and desperate. First days mean suicide attempts also caused by complete hopelessness and desperation. But if there are competent medical professionals at this person's side, or simply reasonable and compassionate people, then the person gradually gets used to this diagnosis and starts trying to find out how to live with it. The distance from HIV to AIDS is measured in years; a lot depends on a person's health condition and life style. When a person learns the entire truth about HIV/AIDS – that you can have children while being infected, that there are drugs reducing viral load so that the virus won't be transmitted even through sexual contacts, they begin to feel more secure about this diagnosis... although how can you be completely secure about it, this is not possible. But that makes people more adequate in their lives.

GA: I would like to conclude this program with words of **Imara** Jones of Viacom: "Our situation is unique because we are given an opportunity to do something to combat AIDS. HIV/AIDS is a preventable disease if people have correct information. And this is a unique resource available to any media company."

As mentioned above, large Russian media conglomerates are participating in the anti-AIDS campaign. Within the framework of this initiative its participants committed thirty million dollars worth of air time in the first year of the project for broadcasting PSAs and full-length stories. Do the project participants have any kind of commercial interest or is this just charity? Gregory Davidson, your radio station in New York is a commercial company. Why are you participating in the American anti-AIDS media campaign?

Pavel Sheremet, what is your interest in participating in Stop-SPID campaign?

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Olga:

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Olga: In Russia we too have hot lines, Web-site and brochures on HIV/AIDS. Alec Khachatrian, has the Russian media partnership succeeded in making this information available to the broad public? Or is this designated for certain population groups?

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According to Imara Jones of Viacom, another important factor must be taken into consideration:

DALET, ACT 4

Do you agree with Imara Jones that demographics play an important role in increasing public awareness of the HIV/AIDS issues? To what extent is this important for Russia?

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Olga:

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Are people living with HIV to blame for what happened to them? This question is answered differently even by those who were affected by the disease. Can the media help the society to find the correct answer? Alec Khachatrian, what do you think?

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Inna: In his special address to the Moscow Summit participants a year ago, the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said that the media have a unique capacity to assist in combating AIDS. However, do you believe that media efforts are by themselves insufficient to resolve this global problem? Is there a model for partnership between the media, the governments and NGOs on the national or on the global level?

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Olga: Should a journalist be absolutely tolerant in covering the subject of AIDS?

Is there a censorship of HIV/AIDS coverage?

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Inna: To conclude our program, I would like to ask Imara Jones say a few words:

DALET, ACT 6