

## HIV/AIDS Close-Up

**Remember how *The War of the Worlds* movie ends? The human race is saved from imminent destruction by... microorganisms. Bacteria, viruses – they are invisible, but they have an inexorable, sometimes fatal effect upon us. They are so small that it seems physically impossible to stop their progress – by simply mounting obstacles in their path. But this is only what it seems...**

What do viruses of flu, hepatitis B, or tuberculosis have in common? Just one thing: each of them CAN BE STOPPED. It's not true, you would say. And thus betray your "virophobia" and lack of knowledge. What worries is not just the fact that you look at this world through either black or rose eyeglasses. Much more dangerous is the fact that millions and billions of other modern and quite intelligent people like you look at this world through the same distorting lenses of prejudice. It is even more frightening that this prejudice opens doors to the virus. It opens even those strong gates which could by themselves give a 100 percent protection against infection.

### HIV Myths

I have spent a month traveling across Russia: to Moscow, St.Petersburg, Krasnoyarsk, Abakan, Kyzyl, regional towns and remote villages. Like students of ethnography who collect folk lore during summer internships, I was collecting tales of... HIV. The human immunodeficiency virus – in case someone is not familiar with the term. I filled almost a whole notebook with myths about a 25-year old phenomenon, so I will quote here only the most widely spread ones.

#### **Myth # 1. HIV and AIDS are the same thing.**

In fact, the difference between HIV and AIDS is as big as the difference between children playing football and a window broken by a careless "forward." Just because the virus is present in a person's blood does not mean that a person living with HIV is doomed to early death. If AIDS is fatal indeed (a patient diagnosed with AIDS can die as a result of any disease), HIV lets a person live for indeterminate number of years because the mere presence of HIV in your blood does not mean automatic immune deficiency.

#### **Myth # 2. There is no treatment for HIV.**

If HIV gets into your system, it cannot be killed. This is true. However, it is possible to curb its proliferation and therefore to stabilize your immune system. There are treatment methods to achieve this goal, they are called highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART), and they have only two significant shortcomings:

- 1) drugs that block HIV are highly toxic (in other words, taking these drugs might affect your liver);
- 2) the cost of therapy remains high: annual cost of treatment in Russia is as high as \$ 10,000 to 12,000, and only in some Russian regions the costs of treatment for all who need it are covered by the government.

#### **Myth # 3. HIV in your blood threatens only certain "high-risk" population groups such as sex-workers, drug addicts and so called sexual minorities.**

Once upon a time, when the virus was not so widely spread, that used to be true indeed. A shared needle, uncontrolled flow of customers micro-traumas in non-traditional sex were indeed creating favorable conditions for virus transmission, and nothing changed since then. But why then all these ways of virus transmission are relegated to the background since long ago? As of January 2005, the most frequent way of HIV transmission in Krasnoyarsk region (over 50 percent of all new infections) is through heterosexual contacts? The virus has long ago crossed

the boundaries of "high-risk groups" and now it is spreading among quite conventional populations. In this situation one can hardly speak of mythical "groups," one should rather speak about high-risk behavior. And this is not the same, is it?

**Myth # 4. Parents living with HIV cannot have a healthy child.**

A quick correction: HIV is not a disease. HIV is a virus which by itself does not guarantee a development of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. Now to the point: even in the poorest African states where ART is virtually unavailable, infected mothers give birth to up to 50 percent of HIV-free children. And if the therapy is available, like it is in Russia, to virtually every pregnant woman, a child may be born without HIV in one hundred percent of cases.

**Myth #. HIV is highly contagious; this is why the epidemic spreads so rapidly.**

Yeah, right. "Plague of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." I can imagine the surprise of this "slogan's" inventors when they learn that HIV transmission is 100 times less active than that of the hepatitis B, and that it is 3 000 times less contagious than the flu virus. It cannot exist in the environment. This is why HIV, unlike plague or flu, cannot be transmitted through air or household contacts – through clothes, dishes, shared household objects. HIV is stable only in three body fluids: blood, sperm, and vaginal discharge, and it can be transmitted only through direct exchange of these fluids. At the same time, even a kiss, which is almost an absolute guarantee of transmitting certain types of hepatitis or of tuberculosis, is absolutely safe in case of HIV. The conclusion is simple: you have to try real hard to get HIV in your blood. Excluding, of course, cases of violence or medical malpractice. But cases like these are so rare that they do not affect overall statistics.

**Myth # 6. The epidemic will be stopped as soon as HIV vaccine is discovered.**

No!

And perhaps this is the hardest disappointment that the human race will have to face. The hepatitis B vaccine does exist, but people keep dying from hepatitis B. Anyone who wants can be vaccinated against tick-borne encephalitis, but every year people die from tick bites. The problem, unfortunately, is not the presence or absence of a vaccine, but people's neglect of their health.

**Myth # 7. The only way to stop the epidemic is to isolate all HIV carriers. This can cause multiple personal tragedies, but it will save human race from extinction.**

Just one question: how are you going to tell the difference between a healthy person and an HIV-carrier? By testing? For radicals' information, tests identify only the virus that is already "rooted." And if the virus penetrated your system two weeks ago, your test will be negative. This is one. Two, WHY isolate people who present much less danger than road traffic? Would not it be simpler to learn basic RULES, just like in case of traffic regulations?

**Myth # 8. I will never be infected because I take care of my health. HIV is not my problem, it does not affect me, I don't want to think about it.**

Remember children from Elista who got infected through blood transfusion? They did not even know what HIV is. Remember rare, but still happening cases of infection in dentistry clinics and beauty salons, or through blood transfusion (two cases like that happened in Krasnoyarsk region: in Yeniseysk and in Boguchany). Remember finally that even if you take sufficient care of your health, the health of your family – children, parents, siblings – is not in your hands. And if HIV is found in the blood of your family member – that will affect you too. You and all of us, sooner or later we will understand that HIV is everybody's problem. The question is – at what cost?

The point is not just the virus fastness. The point is people's stubborn unwillingness to recognize the problem; their amazing, almost absurd sloppiness, blindness to the fact that their health is the highest value that a human being might possess – these are the epidemic catalysts. Below we will try to describe the present state of affairs and to understand what role the authorities, the society, and each of us can play in reversing the situation.

## **HIV numbers, timeline, and geography**

**1981**

### **Start of the epidemic**

The AIDS epidemic begins in 1981, when the first cases of rare form of incurable pneumonia were identified in the USA among the gay community. Recent research, however, shows that HIV had already been in existence years before this date.

**1984**

### **Discovery of the virus**

French scientist Luc Montagnier and American Robert Gallo have identified a human retrovirus causing AIDS, which was later named the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

### **Prevention**

The Netherlands begin to implement the first syringe exchange program in the world.

**1986**

### **HIV in Russia**

First case of HIV infection identified on the USSR territory

**1987**

### **First treatment**

EDA approves zidovudine (AZT) - the first antiretroviral drug in the world to treat AIDS.

### **Vaccine testing**

FDA issues permission to test proposed HIV vaccines.

**1990**

### **Pandemic spread**

UNAIDS estimates that 9 million people in the world are living with HIV/AIDS

**1992**

### **AIDS deaths**

AIDS-related illnesses become the leading cause of death among African males of 25 to 44. The situation remains stable till 1995.

**1995**

### **Russia's actions**

Russia passes the Federal Law on HIV/AIDS that guarantees HIV-positive citizens free access to treatment.

### **Pandemic growth**

UNAIDS estimates that 23 million people in the world are living with HIV/AIDS

**1997**

### **USA accomplishments**

The number of AIDS-related deaths in the USA decreases 40 percent in comparison to previous year, due mainly to the highly active antiretroviral therapy.

**2003**

### **Vladimir Putin's statement**

Russian President Vladimir Putin in his annual address to the Federal Council says that decreased life expectancy presents a serious threat to Russia's future. He adds that "the situation is further aggravated by AIDS."

### **G.Bush's initiative.**

US President Georges Bush declares launching of a presidential emergency plan for assistance to AIDS victims – a five-year long initiative for which \$15 billion is allocated.

### **Pandemic growth**

UNAIDS estimates that 40 million people in the world are living with HIV.

*In Russia currently (as of June 2005) there are **321908 registered HIV cases**. It is easy to calculate that only according to official statistics one Russian in every 500 is HIV-positive. Experts estimate that official data are 3 to 4 times lower than actual incidence as a rule, so we can say that incidence rate in Russia is approaching **one** percent of overall population of the Russian Federation*

*Among Siberian regions the situation in terms of registered HIV infections is the most serious in **Irkutsk (18235 cases)**, **Kemerovo (7242 cases)**, and **Krasnoyarsk (6282 cases)**, and almost half of the Krasnoyarsk regional statistics is supplied by the city of Norilsk. **Khakassia** and **Tuva Republics**, according to the regional HIV/AIDS prevention centers, look relatively well against the general background (**135 and 24 cases** respectively).*

## **Whose problem is this?**

**Whoever among living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century still entertains archaic idea that HIV/AIDS is an exclusively medical problem, will have to abandon this prejudice. The prejudice which is most likely based on lack of knowledge about the real scope of the tragedy, not on sheer stupidity. We are not stupid, are we?**

HIV/AIDS has long ago transgressed the limits of laboratory tests and rare cases. Today it is not a medical but rather a social, political, economic and ethical problem. I will not try to hammer this idea into your heads just by being loud. Let us just think together. Perhaps you will be surprised how close this problem is to you personally.

First of all, HIV (AIDS) is not something bizarre, incomprehensible or extraterrestrial. This is a typical virus, like thousands of others. And the fact that its existence has turned into such a massive problem does not make it more unique, but tells the human race that the human race had chosen a wrong tactics.

The virus' distorted image (if I may use this phrase) has been made, as any other image, by image-makers skillful in ideological warfare. All arguments to the effect that the West is bad, and the USSR is good, were exhausted by the mid-1980s, and HIV identified in the US came in very handy. "See, they have AIDS, and we don't!" In the USSR the HIV/AIDS problem from the start had a political subtext that lead away from the truth: HIV/AIDS was consistently associated with "cursed capitalists" who finally had to pay for their distorted ideas about the "right" world order. From the start HIV was a sign of something sinful, a typical manifestation of "rotting" Western lifestyle. A message which was presented to the USSR citizens in this distorted fashion, was not able to unite the nation against the virus, but was able to create a chimera in each individual Soviet citizen's mind. As the result, the majority of the Soviet Union's vast territory's residents felt nothing but animal fear in respect to HIV/AIDS, and believed that the only sure way to combat it was to avoid any contacts with foreigners. The outcome of this is well known. In the 1990's Russia that was busy building a wall against AIDS in a wrong place, became a world leader in terms of epidemic growth rate.

Soon, when incidence in Russia has reached the epidemic threshold, a new chimera was born: HIV/AIDS is the high-risk groups' "privilege" and decent citizens are in no danger from this nightmare by definition. Time showed this for what it's worth too.

Plenty of "scares" were manufactured that helped the society turn their back on what was really happening. How many other falsifications will we need before we realize: either we will become forewarned, and therefore forearmed, or we will cave in completely to the virus. Considering the speed with which it is spreading, we will not have to wait too long...

Although maybe not. HIV is unique after all. This is the first virus in history to cause SUCH fear that it immobilizes even the ability to organize a fight. Despite the fact that means and methods of fighting it are KNOWN since very-very long ago. Yes, people living with HIV are forced to carry the virus in their blood till the end of their days. But this does not mean that their lives must shorten because of that or become less happy. And it does not mean that every

reasonable person is incapable to protect his or her blood, his or her personal blood. What prevents each of us from protecting it?!

Meanwhile the virus, undermining the human race physically, brings chaos to its societal existence as well, distorting reality, confusing people, and creating dangerous conflicts out of nothing. Remember *Philadelphia* movie awarded two Oscars, which makes the tragedy that awaits a person living with HIV in contemporary society plain and clear. Stigma, discrimination against people with virus in their blood, is a very dangerous trend. Socially it is much more dangerous than racism or Nazism. Will we have enough time left to understand this?

I spent many hours talking to people living with HIV in various cities, and I asked them the same question again and again: "There are so many NGOs in Russia whose objective is to increase public awareness of HIV/AIDS issues, to provide HIV-related services, to reduce harm from high-risk behavior. How come that the problem has not made it to the foreground of public attention yet? Why does the epidemic continue to spread?" And the most frequent answer was the following thought: "There is no political will in Russia in this respect." This concerns not only the President, the Government or the State Duma, although primarily this concerns all of them. But this concerns also the fact that none of the Russians who command unconditional public respect have said yet: "People! I live with HIV. As you can see, I am alive, I feel very well, and I am not going to die. But if everyone makes the same mistakes that I made in my life, our nation will be doomed quite soon. If you want to help me stop the epidemic – let's do it together!" This is what the legendary Magic Johnson did, or the four times Olympic champion Greg Luganis, or dozens of other celebrities in the West. And a single one in Russia. Meanwhile, according to the AIDS-service NGOs in Krasnoyarsk, Moscow, and St.Petersburg, they are quite numerous here. Where are you then? Why are you silent?!

However, these people can be understood. It is their private right to keep silent about their problems. Even though their silence is a manifestation of that very indifference which makes all "despoiling and killings" happen on the Earth. It is much more dangerous that silent are the people whom we hire to create safe and comfortable living conditions for ourselves: people that are public servants. They cannot be called ignorant. They are most likely not stupid. Why then the HIV/AIDS problem is outside the scope of law? Why only local authorities, or regional authorities at best, concern themselves with the problems experienced by people living with HIV? Why is it only in Moscow that antiretroviral therapy is accessible to all, while only half of those to whom it is prescribed in Krasnoyarsk region have a chance to fight the virus? Access to treatment is even more limited in Khakassia and Tuva where absolute numbers of people living with HIV are ten times lower. WHY?! Where is the governmental policy on fighting the epidemic? What? We don't have enough resources?! Remember all the campaigns against the so-called atypical pneumonia (SARS) where resources became miraculously available! And considering the present size of stabilizing fund that creates a safety buffer "to save the economy" in case of a mythical future default, it is simply ridiculous to keep claiming our lack of resources.

A propos the economy. In Togliatti – a city-car plant on Volga river – the HIV/AIDS situation is reaching a critical point beyond which not only medical, social, or political problems await, but a complete economic crash. Just a few numbers mentioned during a recent training on HIV/AIDS media coverage in Krasnoyarsk testify that in terms of incidence rate among its employees, the *Volga Car Plant* (VAZ) has quite officially exceeded this 1 percent of the overall personnel.

After assessing the situation, the VAZ management made a shocking conclusion: if they leave everything as is today, in just a few years the plant will have NO workers at all. As their next step, the VAZ management adopted several principles:

- 1) no discrimination whatsoever; discrimination will not only lead to social tensions, but it will kill the production;

- 2) provision of full range of HIV testing for all;
- 3) provision of antiretroviral therapy for all employees at the expense of the company, no matter what it costs.

This example is not unique for Russia. But it is very rare. And it mainly concerns the regions where the virus is already cornering people. Certain steps in the area of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment are taken by the *Norilsk Nickel* (the number of registered HIV infections in Norilsk is comparable with the number of HIV-positive people registered in Krasnoyarsk); however until today this is the only company in the entire region that started giving full attention to the HIV problem. Other industrial giants on the great territory are still waiting for something. Perhaps for a proverbial "fried chicken" who is supposed to beck them first? Regrettably, when this chicken starts becking, neither stabilizing fund, nor urgent measures will save anything.

Against the background of such global epidemic problems other subtle effects it has on people seem rather minor. But look closely and you will be terrified: we are moving full speed back to the Spartan times. Imagine: in St.Petersburg, our "cultural capital", the Northern Palmyra, and the Baltic Pearl, a certain "ethics committee" is operating. And its powers include no more, no less, than a decision-making on who among HIV-positive people will be provided treatment, and who will have to wait for indeterminate time for increased financing or decreased treatment costs. In other words, who will live, and who will die. Quite an original understanding of what "ethics" means.

What is the epidemic doing to us? What are we doing?!

### **What is law?**

On one of the "Optimal Option" current affairs talk shows a question was once debated of what is a "constitutional state" or "the rule of law." You would think that this is a state where laws are not broken? Not at all. Laws and the rule of law are different things. The rule of law is a form of public conscience which determines an acceptable organization of social co-existence, a set of rights and freedoms which exist a priori and a priori must be recognized and protected by the LAW. If the law protects these rights, then this is a constitutional law, and a state governed by this law is a constitutional state. If the law violates these rights, the law is not constitutional, and the state is not constitutional. The logic is as simple as that.

But this is just a theory. If the Federal Law "On Prevention of Disease Caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV-Infection) Spreading in the Russian Federation" had been applied one hundred percent, then even our semi-authoritarian state could at least in this respect be considered compliant with the inner logic of law. This law includes all necessary safeguards of HIV-positive people's RIGHTS. But the state policy implemented by the federal government turns this law today into a collection of infeasible slogans. The law is being broken at every turn.

Etymology of breaking the HIV law, as any other LAW in contemporary Russia, has a double nature.

The first level of these violations is a forced inaction. Of course, "forced" should be put in quotation marks. For example, this concerns regional authorities who are forced as the result of the reform replacing in-kind benefits with cash payments, to accept the full burden of antiretroviral therapy costs guaranteed by the state. So far only Moscow proved capable to carry this burden as it was shifted from the federal to the regional level. Some regions cannot cover the necessary costs even in part.

The other level of breaking this law is quite intentional, malicious, and subjective in nature. This concerns the situation already mentioned above that was brilliantly depicted in *Philadelphia* movie. An employer, despite the guarantees stipulated in federal law, forces an employee to take a mandatory test on HIV. A doctor, learning that a patient is HIV-positive, refuses him/her medical assistance. There are innumerable violations of this type taking place,

and in cases like that it is hard to appeal to an unreasonable governmental policy; these are isolated, subjective abuses of authority of various kinds, negligence, or malign intent of individual persons who don't even consider their actions a crime against human beings due to their distorted ideas on HIV issues. Since this subject is excluded from the public dialogue in the Russian society, this does not allow HIV-positive people to fight openly against infringement of their rights without negative consequences for themselves; even such a minor thing that does not require special training or financing as keeping a medical secret, confidentiality of HIV infection, is far from being guaranteed in Russia at the moment, and there is basically no cases involving prosecution of such ethical conflicts.

Apparently, the government which in Russia exists separately from the society and pursues its own interests as confirmed almost daily for everybody to see, is not interested in reversing the situation. The interested party is we. You, your neighbors, my friends, I personally, people we do not know – each Russian, each active member of our society who wishes to live in a RULE-OF-LAW state. It is very appropriate here to ask this core semi-rhetorical question of the last gubernatorial campaign: "What are we waiting for?!"

### **What should be done?**

It is a bit late to ask this question. We are gone too far in our misconceptions; the wounds that the society blindly inflicts upon itself year after year are too deep. However, better late than never, as we all know. And for any emergency situation there is always the same plan of action: consolidation. The state, the medicine, the society, the law – all efforts must be joined and coordinated.

NGOs are actively developing platforms for such coordination. Thus, the first social and political hearings took place in Krasnoyarsk on July 4<sup>th</sup> where public officials were participating jointly with healthcare specialists and members of the public. Each of us and we all together must find our role in this work. There are plenty of options for applying our efforts. Here are just a few examples of the work performed by NGOs which I collected across Russia, which can perhaps provide some tips on where to begin, what is relevant today, what is most effective, and what allows avoiding mistakes.

#### **Kazan. Fundraising.**

*The "Vybor"[Choice] Center at the Municipal Educational Organization "Podrostok" [Teenager], the Youth Public Charity Organization "Zdorovoe Pokolenie" [Healthy Generation], and the Republican Office of the Russian Red Cross have organized a fundraising action for children born to and abandoned by HIV-positive mothers, our correspondent reports.*

*According to Galina Ananyeva, the Center's Director, students-volunteers participated in the action. Collected funds will be spent on purchasing diapers, water filters, toys and other things children need.*

*As Svetlana Yegorova, Chair of the "Zdorovoe Pokolenie" Coordination Board, says, this action launches a long-term project that includes educational support, search for foster families for these children, and public awareness campaign aimed at reducing prejudice against such children.*

#### **Kaliningrad. HIV-positive people chaining themselves.**

*Last fall a group of 10 HIV-positive young men and women, members of an unregistered organization "Anti-AIDS," chained themselves with handcuffs and chains to the entrance to Kaliningrad Mayor's office. Young people were distributing fliers headlined "Our death is your disgrace!" and placed a placard next to themselves which said: "While you are sitting here, we are dying!" Police were called to the site of action. One of the participants resisted arrest.*

#### **St.Petersburg. Coffins in front of the City Government building.**

*The same fall, members of several NGOs organized an unsanctioned protest in front of St.Petersburg city government building. HIV activists demanded to make antiretroviral therapy in Russia available for free.*

*Activists put a placard on the Smolny balcony which said: "Our deaths are your disgrace" and brought... coffins to the government building. At the same time, part of the action participants, dressed in red robes, laid down in front of Lenin's statue so that their bodies formed the red ribbon – the symbol of anti-AIDS movement.*

### **Moscow. St. Petersburg. Krasnoyarsk. Abakan. Outreach activity.**

*Outreach service is aimed at social and medical assistance to sex workers and is based on direct contacts with sex workers. Since sex workers in Russia presently are outside the scope of law, in some Russian regions all organizations that provide assistance to or sympathize with sex workers are viewed as promoters and supporters of sex business and are prosecuted by law enforcement. According to outreach-workers from various Russian regions, NGOs providing AIDS-related outreach services are prosecuted most relentlessly in Moscow. In some Russian regions at different times authorities were banning distribution and exchange of disposable syringes. And while sex business in Moscow is practically drug-free, in St.Petersburg the absolute majority of women involved in commercial sex are using injection drugs, and stopping or reducing outreach work there will inevitably lead to an upsurge of the virus transmission between sex workers who are using drugs together and as a consequence of the virus transmission to clients through sexual contact. According to the St.Petersburg Center for AIDS prevention and combat, already by March of last year approximately one half (!) of the city sex workers were HIV-positive. Yekaterinburg and Moscow who come second and third on this list fall far behind, but there too the situation is shocking: 14% and 12% HIV-positive women respectively.*

*In Krasnoyarsk region outreach work is performed by the NGO "We are against AIDS" within the framework of injection drug use harm reduction program.*

*Servicing street sex workers in Moscow and in Krasnoyarsk is similar in principle but different in practical terms. Sex business in Moscow is rigidly organized. It is not possible to arrive at the "spot" and talk to each woman for 10 or 15 minutes, this would break the working rhythm of the "spot," and "Mommies" will not allow it. An outreach worker's car parks so that it cannot be seen from a Moscow "spot." Outreach-workers gather everything that they need to distribute, walk to the "spot" and while they give away the contents of their bags they get a chance at best to explain briefly where a woman can go in case of health problems, where she can be tested and treated.*

*Street sex business in Krasnoyarsk is based on somewhat different rules. The working rhythm is not so tense which allows the "ambulance," as the outreach-car is called by women, to park right at the "spot" and communicate to each girl individually, inviting her to the mini-van, for an unlimited period of time. By this token the outreach volunteers from Krasnoyarsk manage to give each girl all necessary information in detail, and file all information about her that interests the organization, thus building real statistics about the status of problems in the field of Krasnoyarsk street sex business.*

However, the Krasnoyarsk NGOs' work is not limited to outreach format. Since 1999 they participate in many international, national and regional anti-HIV programs, the most visible of which are listed below:

- 1) 1999 – receiving the Euro Quilt Tour and exhibiting quilts from all over the world in Krasnoyarsk.
- 2) 1999 – launching the harm reduction program in Krasnoyarsk.
- 3) 2000-2002 – developing information resources for injection drug users within the RADAR-Siberia project framework.



4) 2003-2004 – HIV prevention among young people in rural areas: a project supported by UNICEF and "Siberian Initiative" NGO.

5) 2004 – Krasnoyarsk Prison Project aimed at preventing HIV in penitentiary institutions of the region: consulting staff and inmates, organizing tests, training volunteers.

This year the organization "We are against AIDS", with support provided by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, joined the GLOBUS project aimed at preventing HIV among the youth and the general population, providing treatment, care, and social support to people living with HIV, advocating their interests. The project is designed to continue till 2010.

The first in the regional history public and political hearings on HIV/AIDS issues will take place in July 2005 with immediate participation of the "We are against AIDS" NGO, the Krasnoyarsk Regional Center for AIDS Prevention and Combat, the international organization Transatlantic Partners Against AIDS, and the regional legislative and executive authorities.

In Russia alone there are multiple examples and methods of AIDS prevention and service work. Thus, in Moscow there is the Info-Plus resource center whose mission includes support of HIV-positive people and education of the general public in HIV/AIDS issues. The Center works in several directions:

- through a hot line where a caller can get a confidential consultation on any HIV-related question;

- through working with the media (because the media are the main instrument of disseminating necessary information to the broadest audiences possible);

- direct work with HIV-positive people in a "home" format (Monday to Friday, depending on the schedule of the Center's events, anyone can come to the Center as if at home, to meet HIV-positive people, to meet specialists, to watch a movie together, to discuss his/her problems, just to have a cup of tea).

Another Moscow organization – "Community of People Living with AIDS" – besides raising public awareness of HIV/AIDS issues, has the goal of defending HIV-positive people's rights and getting them involved in the community and in anti-AIDS activities.

All the above mentioned Moscow organizations use strictly evolutionary methods in their work. However, there are also marginal anti-AIDS activists, so to speak, who occasionally organize "direct actions" which in spirit and dynamics are akin to coal-miners' strikes on Trans-Siberian railroad, hunger strikes in front of the Government headquarters, or anti-globalists' escapades during world leaders' summits. These are the anti-AIDS activists who handcuffed themselves to the Health Ministry doors and scared Valentina Matvienko in St. Petersburg with coffins. Such actions certainly produce an effect. Equally certainly this effect is rather ambivalent: some people will be forced to think about the issues behind these actions' slogans. The absolute majority, however, will discern in such actions nothing but disorderly conduct. The actions will inevitably provoke annoyance and rejection in the majority of the society. And this fact must be taken into account when actions are planned.

Alas, the very fact that despite this seemingly high degree of public activity, the pandemic keeps gaining momentum shows that unfortunately the absolute majority of people have neither wish nor ability to plan their lives on a long-term basis, to expand their horizon beyond their day-to-day life and its most immediate future. In a situation like this – the one of indifference and connivance – the pandemic feels very comfortable, and nothing obstructs its natural progress. Although how can premature death of a human being be considered natural?

Alas, we – the enlightened human race – are simply trailing behind the epidemic, place facts on record, identify trends, make conclusions, and throw up our hands. And while we keep doing this, the epidemic will continue its development. Until we hold our hands, get ahead of it, and form a barrier blocking its path.