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THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS GREEN FETA CHEESE!

Amur Parliament deputies who repealed the regional anti-HIV/AIDS law should re-read their "Master and Margarita"

Were there an "index of long-suffering" to evaluate the fortitude of a medical institution, then the regional Center for AIDS and infectious diseases prevention and combat headed by Nina Merekina, Honoured Medic of the Russian Federation, would have beaten all the records. At least, the records set in one individual Amur Region.

Meanwhile at the district level the potential winners are already watched closely. Echoes of the scandal story when the center's laboratories were taken from it, hardships of a cold war with the city committee for managing property, multiplied by rare complacency of authorities who practically distanced themselves from the responsibility of providing governmental support for anti-HIV/AIDS measures in the region, were apparently having a decisive impact on the Amur Region's place within the "Table of Ranks" compiled by the specialists from the Far-Eastern District AIDS Center.

Since certain date this supervising structure is grading territorial institutions. It is not hard to guess the number of points earned by the accomplishments of the Blagoveschensk center after it was visited recently by district experts; if it took next-to-last place. More than modest.

But who will cast a stone at Nina Merekina and her ilk? Only those pen-pushers of "luminium" type who keep harping that the chief physician should be held responsible for everything, and intentionally ignore circumstances that mitigate her guilt.

However neither the present chief physician of the Anti-AIDS Center, nor the previous one, Takhir Zalyatdinov, who currently heads the department of methodology and prevention, accept the blame. And apparently for a good reason...

Today the Amur regional center for AIDS prevention and combat is notorious. How could this be otherwise – it is the only one of its kind in the Russian Federation that does not have its own laboratory base. But that was not always the case!

A medical institution with specific functions was organized in Blagoveschensk in 1989, and in December 1990, after training the staff, they opened a screening laboratory for diagnosing AIDS. The lab

was servicing practically all districts within the region, the departmental healthcare system. The immunologic laboratory opened soon after that. Then – the laboratory for diagnosis of AIDS indicators. The Center's physicians were the first in Amur region who began studying hepatitis. Back then this was a totally new area in the Far East.

For lack of better option, the lab service set up together in a very short time was housed on the premises of a former canteen at the regional hospital for infectious diseases. The facilities allocated to colleagues were rather crowded, which did not comply with sanitary and hygienic requirements, so the time came when the sanitary and hygienic inspection, after exhausting all preventive measures, passed a decision to shut the labs down. This is when the resourceful (and incidentally, quite well respected) head of the infectious hospital offered the managers of regional healthcare a choice: you either transfer the labs to me, and I will take care of housing them in full compliance with the sanitary regulations, or else...

Naturally, few landlords are overly considerate of their tenants.

How could that happen, that in 1995 the AIDS Center's labs, together with trained personnel and payroll funds, were appropriated by the infectious hospital? Today it is hopeless to search for common sense in this absurd – as Nina Merekina, chief epidemiologist of the Amur Administration Department of Healthcare, believes still – decision made by the then management led by the nose by a grasping and pragmatic physician. And ten years ago the hopeless case was also quite unsafe. Takhir Zalyatdinov who never accepted the take-over of his lab, was asking his bosses questions so awkward that he fell out of favor and was released from his position of the head of the regional anti-AIDS center.

- I used to fight too much back then, which ricocheted, - recalls Takhir Ashirovich with a bitter smile.

Any specialist would understand the costs of having no arbitration lab at a territorial AIDS prevention and combat service that conducts epidemiological research of HIV infection cases. Amur doctors now have to send serum samples of their patients to Khabarovsk, to the arbitration lab of the district center, to confirm the initial diagnosis. As the material accumulates, it is packed into special containers and sent to the addressee by registered mail in a luggage car of a train. A month passes before doctors receive an official test result.

Not having even a microscopic chance to get back the lost diagnostic base, the center's employees began two years ago to piece together new equipment for the PCR lab. But there is no certainty that the new laboratory will find "lodging."

Since August 2004 the Committee for managing property at the Blagoveschensk administration is tirelessly claiming a decrepit log cabin in the city historical neighborhood, built in the year one, where the regional AIDS prevention and combat center is currently located. Letters unceremoniously offering to terminate rental agreement for some unclear "purposes of proper resolution of local issues" are constantly disturbing the staff that got used, however, to live without unpacking. The medical institution was forced

to move four times during the time period of its existence. And to move to suitable facilities, or to be more specific, to the facilities completely unsuitable for medical and preventive work.

Poor devils correspond with the "chain of command" since 1989 in hopes of prompting them to start building the AIDS center facilities. And not all paper and ink was wasted! A law "On Urgent Measures to Prevent Spread of Disease Caused by HIV" was passed in Amur region three years ago. Epidemiologists could not take their eyes away Section 6 of this document which declared allocation of 10 million rubles from the 2004 budget for construction purposes. They were just short of framing this paragraph and decorating a shabby and crooked wall in the chief physician's office with it.

Now they regret it. They could hang that cutting as an implicit rebuke to windbags with mandates to care for public health. Not a penny was allocated by the authorities to construct the center's building. And recently the regional council of people's deputies repelled that "anti-AIDS" law altogether as financially unsecured. So all this talk meant nothing?

- No, our plans to move the center to another building, perhaps even a newly constructed building, remain unchanged! – objects Anatoly Barabash, deputy head of the regional Healthcare Department. – It is, of course, good to have an additional source of financing, but I see no horrible problem in its absence today. The institution keeps functioning, funded by budgeted costs. And I think it is functioning quite well.

After these words of Anatoly Borisovich whom I much respect, as God is my witness, I want to repeat Bulgakov's lines: "My precious! There is no such thing as green feta cheese! Somebody lied to you about this!" Budgeted costs for supporting the regional center for prevention and combat of AIDS and infectious diseases are enough to make you laugh or weep. Travel costs the year before last were budgeted at 1700 rubles, and last year – at 2700 rubles.

Experts from Khabarovsk Research Institute for Epidemiology and Microbiology at the Russian Federation Ministry of Healthcare and Social Development were deeply alarmed when, upon visiting Blagoveschensk, they discovered that the annual budget of inspected institution is almost identical to the amount that the Yakutsk republican anti-AIDS center plans to spend only on procurement of test systems alone.

This is when it became clear why their colleagues' only phone number shared by three departments is occasionally silent for a whole month, why the alarm system in the building gets disconnected and they have to stay there on guard at nights. Why it is so difficult for them to organize preventive work among vulnerable population groups outside the regional center. In places such as Tynda, the capital of Baikal railroad construction, which is overflowing with injection drugs users and "call girls."

Money talk means priorities talk. There are just over 200 HIV-positive cases in Amur region today. Without much risk of being off mark it can be assumed: local "fathers" consider these numbers

negligible and do not perceive them as forecasting a serious thunderstorm. But the illusion that main battles against epidemic are fought on "foreign territories" – in Vladivostok, Kaliningrad, Moscow, and other places across the country – might eventually cost too much.

Once upon a time, at the dawn of perestroika, a certain female participating in one of the then fashionable TV-bridges, announced to the entire world that "There is no sex in the Soviet Union." Recently at the meeting of the anti-epidemic committee in Blagoveschensk another female made an equally extravagant statement: "Sex-workers are not registered with tax authorities in our city, therefore, they do not exist!"

Intuitively they were both feeling fearful of an element they did not comprehend. But can you ever be safe from it even if you shut your eyes really tight?

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