

By Ada Gorbachyova

NO FOOL LIKE AN OLD FOOL

Middle-aged men become a new HIV-vulnerable group

In Russia HIV dealt its first blow on Kaliningrad. After collapse of the Soviet Union this was where drug trafficking routes began to cross. Among drug dealers who frequently themselves use drugs there were HIV-infected traffickers from Ukraine (where HIV infection flared a few years earlier than in Russia). Drugs accompanied by HIV were also arriving from Poland. Studies made in 1996/97 revealed that a specific virus strain spreading in Kaliningrad represents a combination of Polish and Ukrainian strains.

This region, closed in Soviet times, was hosting large military bases, defense factories, fishing fleet, and shipbuilding yards. Most enterprises were shut down after 1991, and a large mass of young qualified workers became unemployed.

They were engaging in whatever was available

to earn living, mainly in shuttle trade. Then drugs came, and found the fertile soil.

When the HIV epidemic was just starting, its source was believed to be citizens returning from abroad, outbound sailors coming back, or hospital infections. However, these sources were dealt with quickly, as soon as proper anti-infection measures were taken and disposable medical instruments introduced. However, the numbers of drug addicts kept growing. In 1998/97 they were accounting for 98 percent of all HIV cases. Kaliningrad region became number one nationwide in terms of HIV infection rate.

All available resources were mobilized to fight it: school teachers, medical doctors, psychologists, law enforcement. In all schools children were writing from especially composed dictations that listed anti-infection measures. The harm reduction program was launched: drug users could exchange syringes; they were briefed on risk-reduction measures, such as – if they cannot abstain from taking drugs – heating them up before injecting which would at least protect from HIV transmission. The campaign proved effective: Kaliningrad has slid down from number one to number eight.

Tatyana Nikitina, Head Physician of the Kaliningrad AIDS Prevention and Combat Center (regional immunopathology center), finds a positive trend among teenagers of 15 to 17 years – the most vulnerable age group: the number of HIV cases among them consistently goes down. This age group is still manageable: they can receive information at school, in organized communities. HIV rate reduction among this group takes place thanks to tireless combined effort of teachers, psychologists, medical doctors, and youth organizations.

The problem presently is changing shape: almost half of new cases now got infected through sexual contacts. Naturally, commercial sex plays a huge role in HIV and STD transmission. Many women lining up who line up the streets are using drugs. HIV "went public" thanks to them. Newly infected cases are not teenagers, but adults; some are 50, 60 and even 70 years old. The Kaliningrad AIDS Prevention and Combat Center has developed a program for affecting prostitution under conditions of HIV spread. It is focused on working with the youth who are prone to getting involved in commercial sex, such as deviant teenagers, children from



Street temptation.

Photo: ITAR-TASS

dysfunctional families, orphanages, boarding schools; college students living in dormitories. It is of primary importance to give them psychological and educational support, find employment, get them interested in sports, in creative activities.

As for commercial sex workers, it is harder to have a real impact. Assistance given to them includes information on preventive measures; time allocated for confidential medical examination. However this concerns only women who work the streets. Expensive prostitutes working in hotels, in clubs, or on call, as well as their clients, remain inaccessible.

Although the numbers of new cases infected through needles and infected through sex are almost equal, we cannot, as Tatyana Nikitina believes, say that drug abuse now plays a secondary role. Prostitutes who infect their clients very often use drugs or were themselves infected by drug users. That is, drug abuse plays the role of a mediator. Drugs epidemic supports HIV epidemic.

A new high-risk group is now identified in Kaliningrad; it includes people over 40 to 45 years of age. This group is not very numerous in absolute numbers, but this is the group where HIV infection rate grows consistently in recent years. This group is predominantly male, but gradually more women are identified as well. Most often epidemiological examination reveals that women have only one sexual partner – their husband, who transmitted virus to them. While the husbands, going through the proverbial age of "no fool like an old fool", go for some good time with young girls, allegedly not prostitutes, because they take no money for sex (expensive presents, night clubs or restaurants do not count). And then they bring HIV into their families.

The majority of newly infected HIV cases, Tatyana Nikitina says, affect the 20 to 35 age group. School students are susceptible to preventive programs, are wary of infection, and these habits prevail for two to three years after graduation; then the age of sexual activity comes; alcohol and light drugs remove all prohibitions. This group is very hard to reach. These are usually young people from dysfunctional families, although not necessarily poor families. Dysfunctional relations in terms of moral or psychological climate occur in well-off families as well. They make children feel resentful. Young people involved in all kinds of addictions are those who see no future, no meaning in life, have no interest in living it. They fall into a self-destructive pattern.

Adventures with prostitutes, and preferably with prostitutes of the lowest kind, picked up literally in the gutter, are a new sort of entertainment for "wealthy gentlemen", something like an extreme sport. It would seem that if a gas attack is probable, you should wear a gas mask. But – no, these adventurers prefer unsafe sex.

One more thing. Kaliningrad had entered the HIV epidemic almost 10 years ago. Now infection becomes graver, which is to be expected. More and more infected people develop clinical manifestations of AIDS. Over 500 people by now need treatment, but only 78 patients receive it. This is the issue of money. All children and pregnant women have access to treatment. Others are given access to the extent allowed by available funding.

Kaliningrad experience is extremely valuable. HIV epidemic everywhere develops according to the same scenario.

Kaliningrad – Moscow