

Appendix 3.3

Gorbacheva Ada

Nezavisimaya Gazeta

Moscow

October 28, 2005

VOLGA REGION IMMUNODEFICIENCY

In Togliatti 2.5 percent of women giving birth are infected with HIV

By Ada Gorbachyova

This city that still retains its ancient provincial dignity, with its straight streets, noblemen's and merchants' residences, carved window casings, illimitable living mirror of the Volga river, certainly keeps one of the first places in Russia in terms of beauty. And the sad second place in terms of HIV spread – such is unfortunate statistics. As of October 1st, 2005, 25 thousand HIV cases were identified in Samara region. The number is the same as in Moscow or St.Petersburg, while the region's population is several times smaller.

The rampancy of HIV infection here seems unexpected. For many years, almost until the last decade, Samara used to be a closed city; foreigners were not allowed there. Country borders are far away from here too. Neither is it a sea port. For a long time HIV cases were unique here. Back in 1999 only about one hundred cases were known; most got infected through sex and somewhere outside the region's limits. The virus came with the advent of the new century. The outbreak took place in 2000. The hotbed of disease was located in Togliatti city; six months later contamination had spread over to Samara. Why did the outbreak happen in Togliatti can be easily explained: it is a young city, most residents are young (the average age is a bit over 30), income level is quite high. Visitors are coming to Togliatti to buy cars or car parts. They bring money or drugs which they sell to buy a car.

Five thousand new HIV infections were registered in 2000; almost twice as much – over nine thousand – in 2001. Back then up to a thousand new infections were identified during certain months. The immunodeficiency virus was brought in by drugs. 98 percent of all infections in those years were drug users, mainly teenage boys. Of course, there were drug users before as well. But when HIV first penetrated their milieu, it started spreading rapidly through shared needles. Andrey Bykov, head physician of the Samara Regional AIDS and Infectious Diseases Prevention and Combat Center, says that they have begun fighting the epidemics on all fronts. At established exchange points whose locations were posted at the narcological dispensaries, drug users could exchange syringes so that they would at the very least not share them.

A tutorial on HIV prevention methods has been published for teachers (co-authored by A.Bykov). Starting with the fifth grade special classes are taught at schools on basic information about HIV/AIDS, responsible behavior, saying no to drugs, safer practices, and help and support for people living with HIV. The fact is taken into account that some students might be already infected with HIV or suspect that they might be infected, and these suspicions might be confirmed by tests. As students grow up, information becomes more complex. In senior classes it becomes necessary to discuss sexual relations. Safer practices and safe sex are not the same thing. Safer practices mean abstaining from early sex, and abstaining from casual sex when you grow up. Under conditions of the HIV epidemic people need information, and when this information is received since childhood, it ends being some kind of esoteric or exotic knowledge.

The Samara Regional AIDS Prevention and Combat Center, located downtown, is full of people. Apparently unlike in other cities, here people are not afraid of visiting this institution. Maybe this is a consequence of widely disseminated information about HIV. People see infection as a given. Almost every family had to face the HIV problem one way or another – either its members, or neighbors or friends are infected.

The number of new infections decreases. There were two and a half times less new cases in 2002 in comparison to 2001. The decreasing trend remained stable in subsequent years as well. However,

another trend is emerging: there are fewer cases of transmission through contaminated needles among drug users (80 percent versus previous 98 percent), and more cases of sexual transmission, particularly among women. The number of HIV infected women grew 14 times in the last five years. Half of infected women identified today got the virus through sex. This is a general trend in HIV spread which gradually acquires a female face. But it has its specific features in Samara: unlike in other cities, the majority of infected women here are neither prostitutes nor drug users, but the so-called socially secure women, including faithful wives and mothers of families. An emergency surgeon from Samara told me how he discovered during operation that one of his female patients is HIV-positive, to her complete horror. How could that happen is a mystery to her.

Commercial sex is a rather closed environment. What is happening inside it can be gleaned only indirectly. For example, some idea about it can be given by the number of men who got infected through paid-for love. Fortunately, in Samara region the virus has not yet penetrated the commercial sex community. However, fearing a possible HIV outbreak there as well, certain preventive measures are taken. This is a very difficult task, though.

There are also NGOs active in this field in Samara. The "Unity" (no relation to the political party) provides non-medical assistance to HIV patients and their families; the PSI – an international organization – works in prevention area, mainly among younger population. Samara region is one of the first in Russia where HIV became part of daily life. In Togliatti, for example, 2.5 percent of all births are given by HIV-positive women. Pregnant women undergo preventive treatment, and the majority of newly-born are infection-free. Life side by side with the virus is dangerous, of course. But this is not the only menace that threatens human race.