

Appendix 3.4

Gorbacheva Ada

Nezavisimaya Gazeta

Moscow

November 25, 2005

Disease initially discovered in homosexuals equally affects both sexes

Lord Chris Smith, former British Secretary of State for culture, media and sports and a member of the House of Lords of the British Parliament, visited Russia on the eve of the World AIDS Day which is commemorated annually on December 1st. He was the first among top-rank politicians to openly admit being HIV-positive. Chris Smith, 54, is gay. He lives with HIV for 18 years and he says that due to medical help and good treatment he feels quite well.

Quarter of a century ago human race was confronted by an unknown disease discovered in people with non-traditional sexual orientation. Initially it was even called "the homosexuals' disease" assuming that this ailment is specific to men who have sex with other men. However, farther HIV-related developments testified to this being not quite so, and then – quite not so.

The expanding HIV epidemic reached both homo- and heterosexuals. Nevertheless, homosexuals definitely belong to a higher-risk group in terms of HIV. First of all, anal sex as such (including in people with traditional sexual orientation) is the riskiest behavior in terms of transmitting infection – including HIV transmission. Nature took care of natural defense factors for vagina, and not all women get infected during normal sexual act with HIV-infected partner, but anus is devoid of such factors, and when exposed to HIV, there are virtually no chances to avoid infection. Since anal sex does not entail unplanned pregnancy, especially when both partners are male, condoms are frequently ignored too. Besides, casual sex is widely practiced in homosexual milieu, which is dangerous in general.

Nongovernmental organization "Stellit" has surveyed gays in St.Petersburg, including in gay clubs. Unlike heterosexual "club youth" in higher-risk groups, gays know more about HIV. They understand that they are in higher danger of getting infected. And medical help is harder to get. Gays tend to avoid visiting STD dispensaries. Traditionally negative public attitudes towards homosexuality are fully shared by doctors, regardless of the fact that the very medical profession implies tolerance towards a patient's sexual orientation just like towards his race or social standing. Of course, a doctor quickly understands that the patient is a man who has sex with other men, and instead of offering help and support indulges in spicy jokes about his sexual preferences. So homosexuals prefer to go to doctors they know personally or upon referral, or to private clinics if they can afford it. But these are few. Others do not go anywhere at all. Sometimes they manage to benefit from assistance provided by NGOs that have such programs.

Dmitry Mescheryakov who does research of gay community for the "Stellit" organization, says that besides medical side of the issue, gays are experiencing acute psychological problems because of their "otherness." It is hard to admit to yourself that you are different. This is a hard blow for a teenager and for his parents. For parents it is often even harder than for the young men. Teens sometimes are forced to live their families which cannot accept their sexuality. There are also grave social problems. Any community that learns of non-traditional sexuality – friends, classmates, colleagues – begins to discriminate against a gay person, he can even be fired (perhaps the only tolerant milieu is artistic community). Problems experienced by gays are very similar to problems experienced by HIV-infected people: same rejection in the society, same obstacles in getting education or employment. And if a homosexual is also HIV-infected, the problems intensify. You

can count on compassion and help only among others like yourself. Doctors tell that in homosexual couples the healthy one usually cares for the sick one devotedly till his very last days.

But all this is not related to young men involved in sex business. These kids are usually homeless. Not all kids who provide homosexual sex services are gays. Some of them are bisexual or heterosexual forced to earn living through prostitution as passive gay partners. They do not identify themselves as gays, but offer their services all the time as such. These kids arrive from God knows where, eat God knows what, sleep God knows where and with whom. Some clients pay them extra for not using a condom. This is the highest-risk group in terms of infection, including HIV. Most of them have no ID, no documents, no residence registration. Of course, medical insurance is out of the question. Consequently, no medical help. Except in cases when medical workers are willing to help. There is a project "Health and Protection" implemented in St. Pete where street sex workers are offered help. Among kids in this group, some are as young as eleven. These are kids from dysfunctional families, frequently victims of child abuse, who run away from families or boarding homes. They come to the Gostiny Dvor [downtown shopping mall] where they are quickly enlightened on ways and places to make some money. The St. Petersburg "Stellit" organization staff say that if a child survives for three months out on the street, he or she is very difficult to return to normal environment. How many among them are HIV-infected is anybody's guess. This is of course a social problem, not a medical one. And this is a shameful problem. No NGOs can solve it. Solving it is the duty of the government.

As for a long life with HIV, people like that can be found not only in London, but also in St. Petersburg. It is Nikolay P. well known to everyone who is involved in HIV issues. He lives with HIV for eighteen years, he retains optimism, and he runs the Society of People Living with HIV/AIDS. He is our "response to Chamberlain" or rather to lord Chris Smith.