

Appendix 4.5

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ADJUSTMENT FOR A TROUBLED SLAVIC SOUL

Role played by comic books in educating underage inmates in foreign countries about HIV/AIDS is too exaggerated

According to the Primorye Territorial Clinical AIDS and Infectious Diseases Prevention and Combat Center, by November 1 of this year, 6344 cases of HIV infection were registered in Primorye, which is 3 times more than in all other Far Eastern regions combined. Over 68% of the newly identified HIV cases are young men of 15 to 30, and quite a few among them are "doing time" in penitentiary institutions.

HIV infection was first documented in the territorial penal system back in 1998. First these were unique cases, but then it gained momentum. As of the end of last year, for example, almost 600 HIV-positive inmates were kept in Primorye detention facilities and colonies, some of them – under 18 years of age. What do these underage teenagers, isolated from the society, know about HIV? What are the risks of its transmission in a colony for teenagers? Which form of offering information suits the convicts best? Answers to these and other questions that interest specialists were sought by the "Zhizn" Youth NGO in Vladivostok and by doctors from the Primorye Territorial Clinical AIDS and Infectious Diseases Prevention and Combat Center. Twice over a period of two years they have visited the teenagers' colony within the framework of projects "Let's Talk" and "Protect Yourself" realized with funding from British and American donors.

The project manager, Head of the Psycho-social Consulting and Voluntary (Anonymous) Testing at the HIV Center, Chair of the NGO "Zhizn" Board, Yelena VOITOVSKAYA shares her rather interesting experience in educating underage convicts with the Medical Newspaper readers upon request of our correspondent Vladimir KLYSHNIKOV.

Low barrier behind a tall fence

The NGO "Zhizn" from Vladivostok initiated AIDS prevention programs in the children's educational colony in Vranghel town of Primorye back in 2002. The strategic goal could be formulated as follows: improving underage inmates' health by means of increasing their awareness of HIV/AIDS issues.

But in fact, when we launched our work, we were rather pursuing tactical, very specific objectives – identifying the kids' level of knowledge of the problem; assessing behavioral risks; determining the most effective way under penal zone conditions' to present information; and of course, developing effective preventive programs.

Our UK donors claimed that the most perfect and easily "digested" form of educational information for young men to absorb is comic books. Is that so? Besides performing research in the suggested area, we were also "measuring" inmates' awareness of HIV transmission ways and their competence regarding protective measures, investigating their views on using condoms and the target group's attitude towards people living with HIV/AIDS.

In our questionnaire answered by almost half of the colony wards (200 teenagers) we focused on finding out their general level of being informed about HIV. And qualitative research (focus groups with 76 participants and 30 face-to-face interviews) clarified the picture of high-risk behavioral patterns and gave us food for thought on preferable forms and methods of prevention in this closed environment.

Developing the questionnaire, we included questions that helped to create a profile of our respondents: age, family status, education level. Some teenagers were having very hard time answering our questions because they could barely read or write. One young man there did not know either characters or numbers. Of course, this extremely low level of general literacy was shocking...

Not a rude "spidushnik" but a gentle "vichik"¹

First, however, a few words about the colony where the research was conducted. This is a very ordinary penal institution with minimum security for teenagers of 14 to 18 years. In 2002 four HIV-positive kids were confined within its walls.

When we came there, we immediately noticed that a strict hierarchy exists among inmates. There is such a rigid structure of teenagers' relationships within the zone that it is impossible to break by any preventive actions. I have to admit that before my trip to this not too distant hold we were thinking on a global scale: let's train several kids in outreach work based on the experience of the well-known "Harm Reduction" program, and implement preventive programs at the penal colony with their assistance. But this turned out to be an unrealizable dream.

There is a group of so-called commanders in the children's colony that dictates everything to everyone. These are mainly unit leaders, four or five people who were living separately, with their own kind, and were enjoying substantial privileges. They practically do no work in the camp, and communicate with the rest of inmates in terms of "fetch-this-and-fetch-that". Being at the top of the social ladder there, these teenagers shape the attitudes and behaviors that are considered acceptable within the zone.

The second group included "orderlies" and "aid-men" who served as liaisons between the commanders and the rest of the zone. And finally, there was the lowest cast that included the majority of inmates. In 2002 its representatives were rudely referred to as "pigs", but in 2004 as we noted to ourselves with satisfaction the commanders started treating them differently, relatively better, as "boys" and "beavers".

We were surveying all three communities. The age of respondents was in general no higher than 17. Most respondents – according to them – came from single-parent families; some were left without parental care, others had their family members convicted and serving sentences. Some teenagers never went to school at all, so it is no wonder that they were barely literate...

Questionnaires, as well as the following informal communication with the teens, gave us many more interesting and even unexpected details. Our question "Do you have friends or acquaintances with HIV?" was answered positively by 42% of all respondents; 38% maintain relations with them; 26% do not know.

We were amazed by the brotherly and caring attitude of the entire zone to their HIV infections. "Vichik's" – as they were called affectionately – received all kinds of assistance, including material. "Vichik's"... this sounded so different from a contemptuous and disgusted "spidushnik" term which is occasionally slipping into newspaper pages!

Disposable razor... for common use

Let's proceed, though. To the question: "AIDS – what is this?" 59 percent of respondents answer: a lethal disease; 46 percent indicate that AIDS is a disease of drug addicts; 41 percent – of prostitutes; 47 percent – of anyone. Inmates have mixed attitudes towards early sex. 54 percent of young men have already had sexual experience, while 31 percent claimed having no sexual experience whatsoever. 13,6 % of teenagers admitted taking part in group sex. And only half of those who practice sex use condoms.

Meanwhile I would not call our respondents overconfident. To the question: "Can I get infected with HIV?" 52,6% respondents answered positively in 2002, and 70% in 2004.

Seven percent of respondents believe that they can get infected while injecting drugs; 30 percent – through shared shaving razors. Incidentally about these razors which at the zone were called disposable for some reason. Although the reason can be guessed: when the same razor is used for shaving first by the unit commander, then by his "orderlies", and finally by the "beavers", it would certainly find its way into trash after that. Sharing shavers is definitely one of the most serious risks of HIV/AIDS transmission in penal colonies, and it should not be underestimated.

¹ Both words designate AIDS/HIV carriers; the first word is derived from SPID (Russian for AIDS), the second – from VICH (Russian for HIV); the sound of the first associates it with something derogatory, and the second sounds as a pet name.

Tattoos: 68.9 % of all teenagers who we involved in our research are walking picture galleries. All thinkable and unthinkable patterns ornamenting visible and invisible body parts are tattooed in pre-trial detention facilities. It is virtually impossible to get a tattoo in the children's zone, here this ritual is strictly banned, and violators are severely punished.

It so happened that tattoos have become the most telling touchstone of our preventive work in the colony.

During our first visit to the penitentiary we have discovered that approximately 85 percent of tattoo specialists were using their tools and ink again and again. In just one year, during our second trip to the teenage zone, we were pleasantly surprised by changes at the pre-trial facility: none of the jail artists, we were told, would make a tattoo in 2004 with their own tools and ink. Everything was provided individually by customers. When we asked teenagers how they know about these necessary personal protection measures, they just chuckled: "Folks who are by now out of here told us. And it was you who told them!"

Never insult commanders!

Specialists from regional centers for AIDS and infectious diseases prevention and combat, as well as managers of preventive programs and projects aimed at curbing the epidemic, who represent nongovernmental organizations, are frequently asked by officials of various ranks: show us the results of your work! AIDS keeps rising like yeast dough... For the whole two years, after our single visit to the teenagers' colony and sowing seeds of knowledge, we were not showing our faces there. And when we did show up, we saw the seedlings with our own eyes. This is the answer for them.

By the time of our second landing party, almost complete rotation of colonists in the zone took place, and only one of our initial acquaintances remained. But the brochures "Let's Talk" that we gave to the colony in 2002 were still there.

When putting together our second brochure on HIV/AIDS called "Protect Yourself", we tried to take into account results of our anonymous questionnaires, the specifics of high-risk behavior among teenagers and the opportunities available to inmates. We agreed with the British that comic books could serve as teasers prompting inmates to take the brochure in the first place, but... with an adjustment for a Russian soul. It can hardly be nurtured and cured with comics alone.

What kind of adjustment? We dedicated only half of the pages to comic strips, and the other half to an adapted text. It needs to be mentioned that medics shared their publishing efforts with psychologists. We were working together on everything: the font size, the number of illustrations, the color scheme. We published one thousand copies of the new booklet and gave it to each teenager temporarily isolated from the society.

Of course, the brochures' distribution was not the end of our next trip to Vrangl. We have held five trainings on HIV/AIDS issues – four for the inmates and one for the colony staff. One important detail: during the participants' selection process – which was strictly voluntary – we took into account the zone's hierarchy. So we were placing the commanders and the "beavers" in different groups. Separate trainings were also held for the "vichik's" and the "quarantine", e.g. teenagers who were just transferred to the colony from the pre-trial detention facility.

There were more applicants for participation than we could accommodate. And those who were selected, I know, did not regret it.

Although not everything went on smoothly. Trainings that we have developed for ordinary school kids we had to restructure right on the spot. My inoffensive phrase: "And now we are going to do some role-playing," which I said to the group of the so-called commanders, for example, they took as a grave insult. What do you mean, playing, playing is for children, and we are grown-ups!!! But an alternative suggestion to hold a brain-storm was welcomed by the kids. And they were good at it too, I must admit. And they were rewarded by some presents to their great surprise.

The grown-ups were happy as children with their presents...

Thus, our work is formally completed. But after our departure it is taken over by the colony medical and psychological services' staff to the extent of their abilities. However, their abilities are very limited. And the officers from the penitentiary system ask us to come back to the colony. It is hard to tell

now when would we be coming back to Vrangeli. Foreign donors' money is spent, and in Russia funding of medical and preventive programs behind the barbed wire somehow is not done...