

## Tashkent Women's Wellness Center Leads Battle Against Cervical Cancer in Uzbekistan

A workshop on the laboratory aspects of cervical cancer held last December in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent was a positive way to end one year and start the next for the close-knit staff of the Women's Wellness Center (WWC) established by AIHA's Tashkent/Chicago partnership in 1997. Clinicians at the WWC viewed the workshop as a great gift that will help them attain a long-planned goal critical for this Central Asian nation of 27 million people—providing for the early detection and successful treatment of cervical cancer, which is one of the main causes of mortality among women in Uzbekistan.

"Introducing effective screening and treatment programs is an entirely realistic goal," says WWC Director Dilmurod Yusupov, who spearheaded the project. "Take Scandinavia, for example. The problem of high mortality due to cervical cancer doesn't exist there because they provide timely preventive measures."



Nina Ivanova (standing) facilitates the case study session that demonstrated how to differentiate atypical cervical cells. (Photo: Vira Illiash)

Yusupov says the idea for the project took shape many years ago when members of the WWC staff visited their American partners at the University of Illinois Medical Center and attended AIHA conferences on various women's health topics. It was at those events that they first became acquainted with successful cervical cancer prevention programs based on the Papanicolaou screening method, commonly called a Pap smear. The value of this approach lies in its ability to detect cancerous changes at the cellular level, when the disease is still curable.

Even though the partnership concluded its work in 2000, the Center's staff did not abandon the idea of bringing this incredibly effective program to their country. According to Nina Ivanova, a WWC cytopathologist who was one of the instructors at the workshop, Pap screening is recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and is used in all Western countries, along with the Bethesda international classification system for reading Pap diagnostic smears. The latter was named after the city in Maryland where it was adopted in 1988.

"Despite the procedure's international acceptance, it was not the general practice in the countries of the former Soviet Union to use this method or make diagnoses based on it. Instead,

they developed their own simplified and less effective system," Ivanova explains. What's more, she noted, many countries in the region continue to use the outdated classification system that was common in the rest of the world until the 1960s.



Yusupov always knows ways to improve women's health, and this is why, according to his staff, he is highly respected by healthcare workers and appreciated by patients. (Photo: Vira Illiash)

Articulating some of the reasons why WWC staff was eager to implement the new protocols, Ivanova continues, "The [currently accepted] international classification system is very convenient for interpreting smears and giving results. Most importantly, the proper patient care algorithm has already been developed for it. Now that our country is independent, we want to be part of the international community. We want people in other countries to be able to understand us and we want to wage an effective fight against the problem of cervical cancer in our country."

This aspiration is what laid the groundwork for introducing a cervical cancer prevention program in Uzbekistan. When financing for the partnership program ended, Yusupov and his colleagues started looking for ways to attract sponsors who could help bring their plan to life. In this regard, AIHA Program Officer Emily Fedullo—who served as a Peace Corps volunteer at the Center in 2000-2001—was a great help, according to Yusupov. With her methodical assistance, in 2003, WWC staff members won a grant from USAID to establish a cytology laboratory. He also emphasized the role of Jan Reimers, the president of International Clinic in Tashkent, who is an Ob/Gyn by the specialty and who provided tremendous help with training the center's staff on pap smears' reading, and also continues to assist the center methodologically.

In addition, the medical technology firm Welch Allyn—AIHA's long-standing partner—donated a colposcope for performing gynecological examinations and staff continued to upgrade their knowledge of the latest evidence-based gynecological care techniques. Armed with highly skilled clinicians and the equipment necessary to perform cytological analysis and colposcopy, the Tashkent WWC became one of the country's leading alternative women's health institutions.

### *Spreading Life-saving Knowledge to Other Parts of the Country*

As a result of the WWC's groundbreaking efforts, in 2004 the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) requested that center staff conduct a series of cervical cancer prevention

training sessions for various specialists from five pilot areas spanning the country. Under an agreement between UNFPA and Uzbekistan's Ministry of Health, oncology centers in these regions will soon receive the diagnostic equipment they need, while primary care institutions will be equipped with test systems for using Pap smears to detect precancerous cervical changes.

The December workshop brought together 16 cytologists from oncology centers and primary care institutions in these pilot regions of Uzbekistan and was the second event held by Center staff under the UNFPA project. The first event was organized in 2004 for gynecologists from the pilot regions. On that occasion, participants were trained how to take samples for Pap smears and read the test results. They also learned the relevant patient care algorithms, according to Ivanova. "A good smear helps to ensure an accurate test. Doing a good test depends on the experience, knowledge, and competence of the cytopathologist who reads its," she explains.



During the tour of the WWC's cytology lab, Nina Ivanova encourages participants to try using some of the equipment, including the microscope used for reviewing cervical cell samples. (Photo: Vira Illiash)

In an effort to inculcate participants with as many practical skills as possible during the recent workshop, Ivanova and her colleagues devoted significant time and attention to clinical case studies. In these exercises, laboratory staff trainees learned to differentiate the types of atypical cervical cells, determine the degree of damage to the cells, and make classifications using the international scale. In addition, participants had a chance to visit the WWC cytology lab, get familiar with the laboratory equipment and the system for recording and filing test results, and practice reading cytological smears.

By the end of the workshop, the participants had mastered the material so well that they were answering the instructor's questions in unison. That is testimony, of course, to the high level of professionalism of the WWC staffers who conducted the workshop, as well as the good training and great interest of the students.



During the tour, WWC ob/gyn Delfuza Kurbanbekova shows participants cervical cancer cases on colposcope screen. (Photo: Vira Illiash)

Sayura Avtykova, a cytopathologist from the Ferghana Regional Pathology Laboratory who attended the workshop, said that the Pap method represents a new level of clinical care that lab specialists must master to do their work well. "I understand that when we receive the new equipment and reagents, it will be a little bit of a challenge for us because none of our specialists have ever used the Pap method before. On the other hand, we are glad to be able to reach this new level of competence because we still have a very low early detection rate for cervical cancer, despite our best efforts. Obsolete technologies and equipment are to blame."

This will not be the last workshop. The WWC staff will be conducting another series of educational events of this type in the near future. When asked how they manage to combine their ongoing clinical work at the WWC with this training function, Yusupov and his team laughingly admit that they work from before dawn till after dusk. All day they are busy with their patient care and administrative responsibilities then, in the evening after the door closes behind the last patient, they go to their computers at the Learning Resource Center and plunge into the virtual world of new technologies, looking for interesting educational material and planning lessons for upcoming workshops.

"We are happy to have an ongoing opportunity to improve our level of knowledge. To tell you the truth, it's become a habit for us," Yusupov says. It is through this kind of striving for constant professional improvement that the staff members have made the institution entrusted to them viable and financially self-sustaining.

"Although the partnership program ended a long time ago, the resource base and the knowledge this collaboration helped our doctors and nurses gain has given us the ability to succeed in our work and to continually develop," he stresses.



One of the workshop participants looks at the training microscope while a lab worker observes the test. (Photo: Vira Illiash)

A further testament to the success of the partnership—and even more so to the professionalism and dedication of the WWC staff—can be found in the growing number of patients who come to the center each year. "When we survey our patients, some of the main reasons women cite for choosing our facility include the staff's high level of competence and the comfortable atmosphere—which is very unusual for a medical institution," he says, noting that another important factor is that the WWC offers care to women of all age groups and combines as many healthcare services as possible under one roof.

"There are great hopes that our cervical cancer program will be as successful and sustainable as the programs implemented through our former partnership are," Yusupov concludes, noting the involvement of the Uzbekistan Ministry of Health is a good sign. For the first time in many years, the ministry has included cervical cancer prevention in its 2006-2010 Strategic Plan for Reproductive Health. "That alone tells you that our government wants to change the situation for the better and we are proud to be able to help our country in this effort."