

Skills-based Training for Medical Professionals Offers Prospect of a Brighter Future to Ukrainians Living with HIV/AIDS

Knowledge Hub Courses Combine International Expertise and National Best Practices to Help Ukrainian Specialists Provide ART to People Living with HIV/AIDS

Every disease has a human face, and HIV is no exception. In fact, HIV has many different faces that may be imagined in many different ways—the face of a child distorted by physical pain, the face of his mother exhausted by despair, or the stricken faces of young men and women when they learn their life-altering diagnosis. These faces, however, reflect only one side of the epidemic. When treatment and compassion are available, HIV can be overshadowed by the faces of the neighbors, friends, and loved ones who make up any society. These are unique individuals with stories to tell, contributions to make, and hopes to fulfill.

In Ukraine, where 90,000 people are officially registered as HIV-positive and unofficial estimates are exponentially higher, the hope of a brighter future for those living with HIV/AIDS is increasingly becoming a reality.

"Today, I know I can live with this disease, but 10 years ago I was convinced that I was not long for this world," says Maxim Nikolayenko, a patient at the HIV/AIDS Treatment and Care Department of the Gromashevsky Institute of Epidemiology and Infectious Diseases in Kiev. Nikolayenko remembers how, many years ago, department head Svetlana Antoniuk helped dispel his gloomy thoughts. "She told me 'people in the West live with this problem and you will also live.' In those days, that sounded like a challenge, though, because there were no antiretroviral drugs in Ukraine and only intolerance toward people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). She and her colleagues were the only specialists who helped us and we survived because they truly cared about us."



Yaroslava Lopatina (left) and Svetlana Antoniuk (right) with Angela and Maksim, two of their patients at the HIV/AIDS Treatment and Care Department. The couple says these doctors are like family to them. (Photo: Vira Illiash)

Only people who were themselves touched by HIV/AIDS realize how the burgeoning epidemic in Ukraine set off a battle for something there would seem to be no need to fight for in a civilized society—the right to life. PLWHA, their relatives and close friends, and the doctors who treated

them paint a poignant picture of how things were, as do those who worked in the handful of international and nongovernmental organizations that recognized the early warning signs of the epidemic and answered their call.

"These people fought against stigma and discrimination. They fought for the right to be treated, for the right to work, to speak, to be heard. They fought for the right to keep on living and to have a future," Svetlana Antoniuk recalls. She was a legendary figure during that difficult period and virtually every resident of Ukraine who has encountered HIV/AIDS knows her name. She managed to do what nobody even dared think about during the height of the AIDS epidemic in the mid-1990s. A time when scarce healthcare funding allocated barely 50 cents a day for the feeding of gravely ill patients and requests by HIV-positive people to be seen at state-run hospitals and clinics were turned down without explanation. There was no question of treating patients with antiretroviral therapy then—it was simply unavailable in the country.

In the face of these dire social and financial conditions, Antoniuk armed herself with optimism and created a team of care providers from her department and representatives of public HIV service organizations founded by PLWHA. According to Antoniuk, this close-knit multidisciplinary team has made the battle possible to endure. Through collaboration, the team managed to find funds to buy medicines and conditions began to improve for patients in the HIV/AIDS department. Then the alliance started to fight for patient rights, including the right to receive care through Ukraine's public healthcare system. Lobbying the government for access to life-saving antiretroviral medicines and more extensive cooperation with international organizations were next on their agenda.

Slowly, positive changes were made, until every patient who received treatment in Antoniuk's department did everything in his or her power to stay under the team's care. And why not when the atmosphere at the clinic was nurturing and the staff highly professional? In addition, the department was the first place in Ukraine to administer antiretroviral therapy (ART). And so, with only 20 beds, it became an oasis attracting people from all over the country. Still, the number of people with AIDS continued to rise to a point where the problem could no longer be

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—Dr. Svetlana Antoniuk,
Head of the HIV/AIDS Treatment
and Care Department at
Gromashevsky Institute of
Epidemiology and Infectious
Diseases in Kiev, Ukraine.

ignored. In 2004, life-saving antiretroviral drugs to treat large numbers of patients arrived in Ukraine thanks to support from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

"Before that, only 100 people in the entire country enjoyed the privilege of ART, but thousands of patients desperately needed treatment," Antoniuk says, stressing the fact that having the drugs does not automatically mean that people's lives are saved. "For many years Ukraine was an isolated country and we really felt the effects of that situation. We had no experience with providing ART and there were no specialists in the country who knew even a little bit about it. We scavenged through the wilderness of the English-language literature, studying various regimens and how to administer them. We used WHO protocols as our practical guide. We collected crumbs of information. Then the international organizations came to our aid," she recounts.



After reviewing a complicated case study on ARV side-effects during one of the Knowledge Hub's training courses, Christian Trader, physician from the AIDS Clinic in Berlin answers questions of participants, while John Marangio, care manager at AIDS Healthcare Foundation/Positive Healthcare, and Alexander Telnov, project physician at Medecins sans Frontieres' office in Odessa look on. (Photo: Vira Illiash)

The Ministry of Health, the Ukrainian National AIDS Center, the International HIV/AIDS Alliance in Ukraine, and several other international organizations combined efforts to develop protocols for ART for adults and adolescents, for providing antiretrovirals to children, for treating opportunistic infections, and for laboratory monitoring of HIV. "We had the basics as of 2003, but everybody understood that without clinical experience, it would be impossible to introduce this therapy into practice. It is not enough just to have standards and protocols. You have to know how to put theories into action and we could only acquire this experience through close contact with international specialists who have been treating people living with HIV for a few decades," she explains.

The opportunity for Ukrainian doctors to initiate this contact came in March 2004 when the Regional Knowledge Hub for the Care and Treatment of HIV/AIDS in Eurasia was opened in Kiev through a WHO project funded by the German Society for International Cooperation (GTZ) and managed by the American International Health Alliance (AIHA) in cooperation with national and international strategic partners. The Knowledge Hub's mission is to help Ukraine—and other countries in the region—train qualified specialists to provide effective treatment and care to PLWHA.

"The opening of the Knowledge Hub was very timely because it preceded the launch of nationwide efforts to provide ART, which began in August 2004," Antoniak recalls. "It was a heady time. We had to introduce the therapy, while simultaneously training specialists. The coordination of these efforts was a notable achievement that can be credited to successful cooperation among the Ministry of Health, the National AIDS Center, and the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, which was the principle recipient of the Global Fund's 'Overcoming the HIV/AIDS Epidemic in Ukraine' program," she says, explaining, "This grant provided financing for the training of Ukrainian specialists, and AIHA and other strategic partners at the Knowledge Hub provided crucial technical assistance and support."

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HIV/AIDS experts from Europe and the Americas who have both clinical and teaching experience, along with regional HIV experts, were tapped as faculty and the Knowledge Hub began offering courses that focus on arming medical and allied healthcare professionals with the knowledge and skills they need to provide comprehensive treatment and support to PLWHA. Antoniak and the doctors from her department were also invited to share their experience as instructors, while the HIV/AIDS Treatment and Care Department itself became the clinical base for the center. Curricula are designed to address key HIV topics ranging from the provision of ART and patient counseling to palliative care and treating opportunistic infections. Each course is rooted in proven adult education methodology and features lectures, case studies, interactive discussions and role plays, and—most importantly—practical training in clinical settings.

"What is great about the Knowledge Hub is the fact that it gives healthcare professionals the knowledge they need for use at a patient's bedside," Antoniak affirms. In other words, course participants are given the opportunity not merely to

listen to lectures on theory, but also to immediately practice what they learn through interaction with each other and with real patients. Another key element of the Knowledge Hub training methodology is its strong focus on continuous follow-up training and clinical mentoring. After a group of participants completes a five-day course, instructors travel to various regions of the country to supervise their work on site and help the newly trained

healthcare providers select the most appropriate candidates for ART and prescribe the correct treatment regimen with a higher degree of confidence and professionalism. After several months, the trainees return to Kiev for more in-depth study of ART.

"Thanks to these training cycles, the physicians began to administer treatment with greater skill. They learned the importance of closely monitoring each patient and worked to improve the working relationship—or partnership—between clinicians and patients," Antoniak says, stressing that when it comes to treating HIV, there is nothing more important than trust.

"Doctors should set an example of treating patients as human beings. That is the only way they can provide effective care to PLWHA because doing so requires understanding their problems."

Acknowledging that the Knowledge Hub's work has brought about changes in the system of care for PLWHA in Ukraine, Antoniak continues, "We were able to introduce the team approach to HIV/AIDS care. This model has long been used in the West and involves close collaboration among doctors, nurses, and social workers to better address medical issues and provide the psychological and social support each patient needs. This method helps us free doctors from the burden of dealing with every little problem, while at the same time ensuring the patient's adherence to therapy, improving his or her quality of life, and bringing our system of care up to international standards."



Ukrainian multidisciplinary HIV/AIDS care teams attend a course on ART initiation for adults and adolescents last November in Kiev. (Photo: Andriy Styopkin)

At this time, 76 care teams have been trained in Ukraine; 30 specialize in pediatric care thanks to funding from UNICEF and the International HIV/AIDS Alliance. Representatives from 24 Ukrainian regions have received training and the HIV/AIDS care team approach is currently operational in 19 of Ukraine's 26 oblasts. In real numbers that translates into 636 Ukrainian care providers trained. These practitioners are now treating 3,186 patients in 24 regions spanning the country. By the end of 2006, another 500 Ukrainian doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals will have been trained by the Knowledge Hub.

Today, approximately 600 people are receiving antiretrovirals in Kiev, although almost all Ukraine's ART patients were undergoing their treatment there until recently. "It is gratifying to see that the doctors involved in caring for PLWHA living in the regions are working with a high

degree of self-sacrifice. All of them have developed a greater need to enhance their level of knowledge and now they feel a strong sense of duty to the patients who come to them for help," Antoniak says, noting with satisfaction that thanks to the Knowledge Hub, the practitioners have begun to work together more closely and exchange experiences.

"In the time since the Knowledge Hub was established, we have surmounted a huge obstacle by breaking down a system that kept us closed off from our colleagues here in Ukraine and around the world, as well as from a whole group of patients who need us desperately," Antoniak stresses, explaining that only through close collaboration and complete mutual understanding is it possible to create effective care services for PLWHA in Ukraine. The goal, she concludes, is to create a system in which there will be no place for discrimination, where patients will feel that they are valued members of society with full civil rights and a guaranteed future. "Now in Ukraine, by building a strong core team of well-trained HIV/AIDS specialists, we have the opportunity to truly help PLWHA. And that is of paramount importance for their future and the future of our country."