

Togliatti/Providence Partnership Introduces Tuberculosis Prevention Program for PLWHA

Tuberculosis can pose a greater threat to the lives of patients with advanced HIV infection than AIDS itself. This fact is well known in Russia, where 55 percent of all patients with AIDS have TB. Treatment of this co-infection is complicated, costly, and time-consuming and the necessary resources are often unavailable.

As an alternative solution to the problem, representatives of the AIHA's Togliatti/Providence partnership with support of partnering organization University Research Co., LLC have recently added a tuberculosis prevention program to the list of services offered by the Togliatti AIDS Center in Russia's Samara Oblast. Partners hope that with this innovation they'll be able to provide timely TB screening for HIV-positive patients thereby identifying those at risk and providing necessary prophylaxis, which is several times less expensive than treating tuberculosis.

Russian specialists received comprehensive training in TB diagnostics and prevention specifically for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) through the partnership program. In cooperation with their American colleagues, the Russian clinicians developed guidelines for TB screening, prevention, and treatment of HIV and TB co-infection, as well as comprehensive instructions designed to improve treatment adherence. All these materials are now being implemented at the Togliatti AIDS Center and the local TB Clinic.

To help their Russian counterparts develop the successful program, a team of specialists from the Miriam Hospital in Providence recently visited Togliatti. Comprised of a pulmonologist, infectionist, adherence nurse, and administrator, this team spent a week working hand-in-hand with their partners to select HIV-positive patients for TB prevention and to practice managing treatment regimens and adherence counseling. In addition, the American partners assisted with the selection of candidates for antiretroviral therapy and instructed them in all clinical issues related to diagnosing opportunistic infections.

During one of the counseling sessions, the American doctors confirmed the first case of pneumocystic pneumonia diagnosed by the Togliatti Center's infectionist. A good deal of time

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was also dedicated to discussing the multidisciplinary approach introduced through the partnership program with a view to help the Russian specialists ensure PLWHA have access to comprehensive, patient-centered care and support services.

Oksana Chernova, head epidemiologist at the Togliatti Health Administration is in charge of the TB prophylaxis program in the region. She says that the guidance she and her colleagues have received through the partnership has helped them introduce TB prevention and HIV/TB treatment activities into the local healthcare system. "For us, this practice is a unique one. Never before was tuberculosis screening or prevention treatment done in Russia, especially in HIV-positive patients. This approach increases PLWHA's access to safe and acceptable care and support services and helps avoid undesirable health-related complications," Chernova explains, noting that the Togliatti healthcare providers have ushered in a great number of positive changes in record time since the partnership started implementation of this program only last year.

Chernova also says the program has been embraced on a regional level. Thus, the Togliatti City Health Administration has secured procurement of TB tests and issued a regulatory order *On Improving Measures for Prevention of TB in HIV-Infected Patients, Early Diagnosis of Co-infections, and Higher Quality of Medical Care Provided to HIV- Positive TB Patients*.

"We have also been able to integrate X-ray diagnostics performed at primary healthcare institutions into the process and ensure that TB cases in HIV-positive patients are reported to the AIDS Center. And, we have established cooperation between TB clinics, public healthcare institutions, and the AIDS Center," Chernova says, concluding, "This, in itself, is a great accomplishment because now we can identify patients who need preventive TB treatment and provide them with appropriate care."