

Expanding Palliative Care Services for PLWHA in Russia

Palliative care services are a common provision of healthcare in much of the West, but remain largely unavailable to patients in many other parts of the world.

Although it should be offered throughout the course of a chronic or life-threatening illness to treat, prevent, relieve, or reduce symptoms without affecting a cure, palliative care is not intended to replace disease-fighting interventions such as chemotherapy for cancer or ARV medications for HIV. Instead, it should provide comfort and support to individuals who are living with long-term illness. Palliative care also plays close attention to the medical, psychosocial, and spiritual needs of patients and their families.



Course instructors Father Victor Potapov, a Russian Orthodox priest living in Maryland, and Mary Callaway, director of OSI's International Palliative Care Initiative, during a training in St. Petersburg.

In Russia and other Eurasian countries, however, healthcare workers often lack the resources and training needed to provide palliative care. In addition, their view of healthcare is more traditional and narrower in scope.

"Palliative care — particularly as it relates to HIV/AIDS patients — has not yet been developed in Russia," admits Vasily I. Shakhgildyan, senior scientific worker at the Federal AIDS Center in Moscow. Although a handful of pilot sites do have special units for the provision of palliative care to AIDS patients, other regions do not yet have this capacity, he explains.

Russia faces many obstacles to implementing HIV/AIDS-related palliative care services, including lack of training opportunities for symptomatic pain management, staffing regulations at clinics and AIDS Centers, and controversy surrounding the use of narcotic analgesics for drug users, according to Shakhgildyan. "One of the main challenges we face, though, is building human resource capacity," he says.

AIHA has been working to change that through a series of training courses targeting physicians, nurses, and other clinical care providers, as well as members of faith-based organizations and other groups that offer care and support to people living with, or affected by, HIV and AIDS.



Participants at a palliative care workshop in St. Petersburg discuss case studies during a group exercise.

Elena Rydalevskaya, a medical doctor and coordinator of drug abuse and AIDS programs at Christian Interfaith Deacon Council in St. Petersburg, attended an AIHA-sponsored workshop in 2006. “The presentations and subsequent discussions with expert faculty were really inspiring,” she says, noting that she learned a lot about the relationship between palliative care providers and their patients.

“Palliative care is much broader than what we currently have in place,” Rydalevskaya says, stressing the importance of the spiritual, social, and psychological aspects of caring for people with a chronic, life-threatening disease — particularly HIV/AIDS, which is surrounded by so much discrimination.

“Only a handful of NGOs are filling this need and mindsets are slow to change,” she says. “Still, workshops like this make it seem possible that our healthcare system can be humanized despite HIV-related fear and stigma.”