

A Mother's Concern for Her Son's Health Benefits an Entire Community

When her 2-year-old son Anton was first diagnosed with diabetes mellitus, Irina knew nothing about the disease or how to treat it. What she did know was that she had no intention of letting her firstborn suffer through multiple hospitalizations or miss out on anything life had to offer. After struggling to manage Anton's diabetes for more than 10 years, Irina—along with a group of parents of

change the mentality about how diabetes is treated—not just for patients and their families, but for doctors as well. We learned that the disease can be controlled by life-style choices such as diet and regularly monitoring blood glucose levels. . . . This information helped us take responsibility for our own health and the health of our children.” As their knowledge grew, fewer diabetes-related complications occurred and the children were able to enjoy a more settled existence. “Before this Center was formed, Anton really was not able to live a normal life—to play sports or dance like other kids.”

Today, however, after eight years of successfully dealing with his disease, Anton is an active 22-year-old systems analysis and management student at Dubna International University. As Anton explains, “It's no coincidence that I am healthy and physically independent—I learned how to take control of my disease at the Diabetes Education Center,” where he and his classmates were taught how to monitor their blood glucose levels and adjust their diet and insulin injections accordingly. “I am much more



Irina (left) discusses education and outreach programs with Olga Vetokhina, manager of the Dubna Diabetes Education Center.

children with diseases and handicaps ranging from diabetes to cerebral palsy—decided to take matters into her own hands. According to Irina, the group arranged to meet with a specialist from Moscow—Dr. Elvira Kasatkina, Russia's chief pediatric endocrinologist—who later became a mentor to them as they looked for ways to help their children. From this relationship, a group of diabetics and their families formed a casual alliance that met periodically to discuss their experiences and various ways of dealing with the disease, as well as to offer each other advice and support. And so, as Irina explains, the students of the Dubna Diabetes Education Center were in place before the school itself.

“When the Education Center was formed in 1993 through AIHA's Dubna/La Crosse health partnership, our biggest concern was the lack of high-quality insulin,” Irina states, noting that frequent hospitalizations were common among Dubna's diabetic population at that time. “But the Americans who worked with us helped



Anton, now a 22-year-old university student, enjoys a holiday with his cousin, Maria, and sister, Varvara.

confident in my ability to judge the best way to regulate my blood sugar level and now enjoy a great deal of freedom and independence.”

Noting that his life would likely have been a series of long hospital stays, doctor's appointments, and diabetes-related health complications, had the Center not provided him with accurate information, Anton now works part-time as a Web master and enjoys computers, swimming, volleyball, and learning English, in addition to his classes at the university. “None of this would have been possible for me if I hadn't received

The diabetes management program created, developed, and implemented through the efforts of AIHA's Dubna/La Crosse partnership is a fully replicable model that uses a multidisciplinary, wellness-oriented team approach to educate patients in self-management of their disease. It is modeled after a community-based program used by healthcare providers in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and was adapted to meet the needs of the population of Dubna, Russia. Since the program's inception in 1993, more than 2,520 diabetics, 1,130 family members, and 343 medical practitioners have been trained at the Dubna Diabetes Education Center. Insulin use has declined by 30 percent and average length of hospital stays associated with diabetes-related complications has been cut in half, leading to a consequent decrease in healthcare spending and—more importantly—immeasurable improvements in the quality of life for the region's diabetic population. Here is the story of how the Dubna Diabetes Education Center changed the life of one mother and her diabetic son. The Center's director's story appears on the other side.*

such psychological support and learned how to handle my condition.”

Especially for young patients, peer support is just as important as receiving accurate information about diabetes and how it can be controlled, Irina admits. “In the early days, it was difficult for our children to adapt to the changes in diet and lifestyle, but now it only takes two or three weeks for them to adjust. Anton and I constantly recommend the Center to people who have just been diagnosed with diabetes. . . . Those children who fall ill with diabetes in Dubna are lucky because we become an extended family for them. In Moscow, most sick children don't have this kind of support.”

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Training and New-Found Optimism Lead to Success for a Mid-level Health Professional and Her Patients

Being a nurse or a feldsher—a medical professional akin to a physician's assistant in the United States—was usually a dead-end career path under the Soviet system of healthcare. Responsibilities for each of these professions were limited and room for advancement and participation in the decision-making process was often nonexistent. For 48-year-old Olga Vetokhina, a feldsher and midwife at a women's clinic in Dubna, a Russian city near Moscow, taking orders from doctors and doing some minor clerical work unrelated to the provision of patient care constituted the bulk of her duties. This all began to change, however, in 1991 when, in response to a growing need in the commu-



PHOTO: COURTESY OF OLGA VETOKHINA. Olga Vetokhina (far left) and Nina Koposova (second from left), a pediatrician and endocrinologist at the Dubna Diabetes Education Center, discuss ways of managing the disease with two young "students" and their mothers.

nity, Olga became involved in an informal support program geared to help diabetics and their families better manage their illness.

"At that time, care for diabetics was limited to occasional examinations and monitoring of blood sugar levels conducted by physicians," Vetokhina explains, noting that long waits and severe diabetes-related complications that resulted in frequent hospitalizations were commonplace. "It was obvious that something had to be done to fill the void in both treatment and management of diabetes." A year after she became involved with a loosely knit support group formed by parents of diabetic children, Vetokhina began working with the newly formed Dubna/La Crosse partnership.

"When we started working with our La Crosse partners in 1992, we made it a priority to create a program that gives diabetes patients the knowledge and confidence to become actively responsible for their own health." This program soon evolved into the Dubna Diabetes Education Center.

But patients were not the only ones to benefit from new-found knowledge and confidence. Through professional exchanges at partner institutions in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and at the International Diabetes Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Vetokhina's attitude toward patient care and her role as a healthcare provider began to change. "It is impossible to overestimate the value of the training I received through these two partnership exchanges," she says. "I was able to absorb and digest a wealth of clinical information and methods of educating patients on how they can control their diabetes, rather than having it control them."

Vetokhina is now the manager of the Diabetes Education Center and has made significant contributions to its overall productivity and sustainability. Her duties include triaging patients according to what type of diabetes they have, teaching education and outreach classes, and overseeing a variety of other management activities such as maintaining patient records, class timetables, and physician scheduling, as well as monitoring and reporting the Center's progress to the World Health Organization. The transition from someone who merely followed orders to a strong and efficient administrator who plays an integral role in both patient care and the decision-making process would not have been possible, she says, without her involvement in AIHA's Dubna/La Crosse partnership.

Vetokhina's personal and professional growth is mirrored by the success of the Diabetes Education Center itself. "Our accomplishments have been very impressive. We've seen a 30 percent decrease in the use of insulin along with substantial decreases in hospitalizations and length of stays as a result of our efforts," she notes. Their achievements were so impressive, in fact,

Based on peer-to-peer relationships, AIHA partnerships focus on developing solutions to healthcare delivery problems that are technologically and economically sustainable in the host country. By assessing the unique needs of the population in Dubna, Russia, for example, AIHA's Dubna/La Crosse partners determined that diabetes was a significant problem among citizens in the community. They responded by creating the Dubna Diabetes Education Center to teach diabetics, their families, and local healthcare providers about a variety of lifestyle choices that can play an important part in the management of this disease. This resulted not only in patients taking a more active role in their own care, but also in radical changes in the attitudes and responsibilities of healthcare providers. Below is the story of one such professional; the story of how she touched the lives of one family in her community is on the other side.

that the Center served as a model for similar programs established throughout Russia.

Explaining that motivating patients to view diabetes as a lifestyle rather than a disease is one reason for the improvements, Vetokhina says. "In the past, patients were passive and uninformed . . . now we teach them self-evaluation skills that make it possible for them to adjust their levels of insulin and prevent severe diabetes-related complications. They themselves are becoming healthcare workers."

Despite all the successes, the Center—along with Dubna's diabetic population—still faces some hardships, according to Vetokhina. "It's not always easy to obtain high-quality insulin or glucometers given the economic situation, but we feel able to overcome these obstacles, thanks to what we have learned through our partnership and, in part, to our new-found American optimism."

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