

Giving a Mother the Tools to Cope with Her Child's Asthma

As 4-year-old Iliyas laughingly helps his older sister chop vegetables for a salad—part of their father's birthday dinner—it's hard to believe that a few short years ago he was barely able to breathe. Plagued with respiratory problems less than one year after he was born, Iliyas was diagnosed with severe asthma when he was 18 months old. "I had taken him to other doctors who had used antibiotics to treat him. . . . They told me he had bronchitis one time, pneumonia the next," says his mother, Zamira. "His condition was so bad that I was truly on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Finally, a friend suggested that I take Iliyas to the pulmonology department at the Republican Institute for Pediatrics and Children's Surgery." It was there that Zamira was told her son suffered from asthma.



PHOTO: PAVEL GUIVAEV

"My husband and I really didn't know anything about the disease at that time. In fact, we thought it was a terminal condition at first and were in a state of shock before our new doctor explained various ways of preventing attacks and easing them when they did occur." Their doctor—Munira Baizhanova—is the chief pediatric pulmonologist at the Ministry of Health of Kazakhstan and chairperson of the pulmonology department at the Institute. After the initial diagnosis, Baizhanova put Iliyas on a systematic treatment and prevention

program using a steroid nebulizer and explained to the young boy's parents what they could do to help manage his condition.

"I feel as though she was bestowed upon us by God," Zamira says of Baizhanova. "She is both a physician and a psychotherapist to us. She makes herself available any time, day or night, and has taught us ways to prevent Iliyas from wheezing by ensuring he follows an appropriate diet and controlling environmental conditions in our home." Still, according to Zamira, the worst thing about asthma is the insidious nature of the disease. "It's a very unpredictable thing—an attack can start in an instant and, after weeks of peace, Iliyas can have a relapse, but the professionals at the Institute have helped us learn emergency care. . . . after many sleepless nights spent in the hos-



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With his asthma now under control, 4-year-old Iliyas—sitting with his mother Zamira and riding his new tricycle around his family's Almaty home—is able to lead a normal, active life.

pital with my son, believe me, I've become a quick study," she says with a wry smile.

Convinced that her life would be far from normal had Iliyas not received treatment at the Institute, Zamira notes that she and her husband have become staunch advocates of patient education and stress the importance of finding encouragement from other families who are going through similar situations. "I feel so strongly about this treatment program that I joined a community board and actively promote the Institute whenever I get the chance. Other parents often call me

Many nations throughout the NIS and CEE have experienced a marked increase in cases of asthma over the past decade due, in part, to escalating rates of air pollution and tobacco use. Changing the mindset of patients suffering from the condition—and many of the healthcare practitioners who treat them—was one of the goals of the Almaty, Kazakhstan/Tucson, Arizona, partnership. Educating young patients and their families to adopt an aggressive approach to treatment and prevention by using Western protocols and incorporating lifestyle changes geared to reduce attacks are the mainstays of a program that resulted from the efforts of the partners. Based at the Republican Institute for Pediatrics and Children's Surgery, this "Asthma School" has significantly reduced asthma-related hospitalizations by training parents and children to better manage the disease. This is the story of one mother's struggle to cope with her son's asthma; the story of the doctor who helped them appears on the other side.

when they have questions about managing their children's asthma and we are working to create a support group."

Iliyas, for his part, is happy to go about the business of being a cheerful and rambunctious child now that his asthma is under control, Zamira says. "He likes to read and draw and play with his toys. . . and, like many little boys his age, dreams of being an astronaut or maybe even a race car driver. He can be anything he wants, thanks, in part, to the systematic approaches to both treatment and prevention we have learned from the staff at the Center—this information has been our salvation because asthma only gets worse if it is ignored."

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Helping Young Asthma Patients Breathe Easier



Dr. Munira Baizhanova examines a young patient at the Republican Institute for Pediatrics and Children's Surgery.

Dr. Munira Baizhanova's patients claim that she possesses a "spark from God." She knows how to treat a condition with the most advanced and effective methods, yet she is warm and caring, always taking time to fully explain diagnoses and treatment options to her young patients and their parents. Currently the chief pediatric pulmonologist of the Ministry of Health of Kazakstan and chairperson of the Republican Institute for Pediatrics and Children's Surgery's pulmonology department, Baizhanova has been treating children with respiratory ailments for more than 25 years. Her wealth of experience, however, has not dampened her quest for improving her skills and bringing the most modern and effective remedies to her charges. That, she notes, was one of the reasons she was so enthusiastic about working with her counterparts from Arizona when the Institute became part of AIHA's Almaty/Tucson partnership in 1992.

"Through our partnership with Tucson, I had access to the most up-to-date medical literature and Internet resources, as well as the opportunity to conduct consultations with experts from the United States and all over the world," says Baizhanova, stressing how important this was given the fact that the most severe pediatric respiratory cases in Kazakstan were routinely referred to the Center.

of prevention regimens and had previously not been an accepted practice in Kazakstan. "Without a doubt, our involvement with this partnership radically improved the way we deal with children who have asthma," Baizhanova states, explaining, "In the past, we basically provided emergency care when our patients had a severe attack. Of course, we still do that, but now we also treat asthma more proactively by teaching patients and their families how they can help prevent attacks by using nebulizers and making lifestyle changes such as avoiding things—cigarette smoke and pets, for example—that can trigger asthma."

Eventually, this patient education program took the form of an "Asthma School" that soon provided ample evidence of the effectiveness of the new treatment and prevention protocols, according to Baizhanova. Impressive reductions in asthma-related hospitalizations, length of stays, and frequent severe attacks helped Baizhanova and the Institute staff convince colleagues throughout Kazakstan that the new protocols should be implemented at other facilities.

"It was a challenge. . . older physicians were especially reluctant to use steroid hormones, but our department proved again and again how effective these drugs are," she says, noting that training seminars for practitioners have been held in many regions of the Republic.

During professional exchanges, Baizhanova saw firsthand the benefits of treating asthma attacks with steroid inhalers, which—according to Western protocols—are also an important component

Educating people and introducing them to new concepts, methods, and technologies provides them with the tools they need to make better lifestyle choices and improve their overall well-being. When dealing with a chronic illness such as asthma, this knowledge can mean the difference between an active, productive life and an existence fraught with frequent hospitalizations and constant worry about when the next severe attack will strike. AIHA partners at the Republican Institute for Pediatrics and Children's Surgery are filling a void in their community by training young asthma patients—more than 200 children in the year 2001 alone—and their families to adopt a systematic, proactive approach to prevention and treatment, rather than reacting to attacks after they have already begun. This is the story of one doctor and her efforts to introduce new protocols that help children with asthma control their illness and lead happier, healthier lives; the story of one of her young patients is on the other side.*

"We are very happy with the way asthma is managed here, but we still have much work to do," Baizhanova continues. "We have learned that we can control the attacks, but our real goal is to change our patients' attitudes and orient them toward healthier lifestyle choices, which include following through with treatment regimens. All too often, parents discontinue the prescribed medication as soon as their children begin to feel better—that's not preventing future attacks and it's a problem we are working to solve at the Asthma School."

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