

Giving Patients the Knowledge They Need to Effectively Manage Asthma

With its damp climate and high level of air pollution, asthma and other pulmonary diseases represent a major health concern for people on Sakhalin Island in Russia's Far East. Seasonal conditions can also be problematic for individuals with asthma, explains Natalya Kravtchenko, a physician at Korsakov Rayon Hospital and Polyclinic. "The winters are harsh with a lot of snow. We use a chemical salt to combat the ice and when it melts, the dust it leaves behind causes complications for many of our patients. At other times of the year, allergies can trigger an acute reaction," she notes.

"When I was at university, the department of clinical therapy had an asthma school. I assisted with their activities and really enjoyed providing patients with information they could use to manage their condition. The knowledge these patients gained helped them live more comfortable, normal lives. When I came to Korsakov, I knew I wanted to start a similar program and, once our partnership with Baylor College of Medicine was launched in 2000, I had the opportunity to do it," the young doctor recalls.

"So many of the asthma patients we see know nothing about the disease and even less about how to manage it," Kravtchenko says. "People fall prey to old stereotypes. They think having asthma means they are permanently disabled and that nothing can be done to improve the quality of their lives. That's why we started the Asthma Care Program—to help people take control of their own health," she explains.

Through her participation in AIHA's Sakhalin/Houston partnership, Kravtchenko—who is currently pursuing a post-doctoral degree in Moscow—had the opportunity to travel to Houston, Texas, where she worked side-by-side with Baylor's pulmonary specialists to learn about different approaches to treating asthma. "On a professional level, getting the chance to see how the Baylor physicians work and gaining hands-on practical experience were really invaluable experiences. What really impressed me, though, was how the medical professionals worked together with members of the local community—representatives from the



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Primary care physician Natalya Kravtchenko with some of the educational materials she prepared to help her asthma patients better understand their condition.

American Lung Association, environmental specialists, local volunteers, journalists, and even police officers. This multidisciplinary approach is something that I'd like to see us implement. We already work with members of the mass media to produce a periodic bulletin, but we need to pull more people in," she says.

Through the program Kravtchenko helped launch, clinicians conduct patient education classes several times a week, teaching adults with asthma to recognize the signs of an impending attack and prevent it from occurring. Using evidence-based protocols adapted from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Korsakov staff designed a curriculum that has resulted in many positive outcomes for people living with asthma.

"Of the 386 patients we have diagnosed with bronchial asthma, 290 of them participate in the Asthma Care Program on a regular basis. Because we teach them how to manage their conditions, most of these patients have become less fearful about asthma," Kravtchenko says. "Once they learn how they can prevent an attack, program participants report a sharp decrease in the number of days they miss work or school. They also report fewer emergency room visits and hospitalizations," she continues, pointing out that many people also increase their levels of physical activity.

One of the underlying tenets of primary care is prevention. In some cases, that means preventing a healthy person from contracting a disease while, in others, it means preventing an existing illness from getting worse. With this in mind, AIHA's Sakhalin (Russia)/Houston (Texas) partners created an Asthma Care Program to teach people living with the condition how to recognize the signs of an impending attack and prevent it from happening. This is the story of one of the physicians who helped launch the program at Korsakov Rayon Hospital and Polyclinic on Russia's Sakhalin Island. The story of one of her patients appears on the other side.

One of the biggest challenges facing the clinicians who run the Asthma Care Program, according to Kravtchenko, is making patients understand that asthma is a chronic condition that must be managed on a daily basis through behavior modification and sometimes medication. "Many patients have a negative association with steroid medications because they can cause health complications and weight gain. Our job is to explain when and how they should use the drugs—at the onset of an acute attack, for example—and make them understand that they will have little or no side effects if they follow the guidelines we give them," she explains. "Another problem we see is that when some patients start to feel better or haven't had an attack for a stretch of time, they think they are cured and stop the program. With these people, we have to make them realize that they have a life-long condition that must be constantly monitored."

For Kravtchenko, one of the most rewarding aspects of this project is seeing the light of understanding spark in a patient's eyes. "As a physician, of course I could treat each attack an asthma patient has and send that person on his way," she admits. "The real satisfaction, though, comes from giving my patients the tools they need to manage their disease themselves because that knowledge will last a lifetime."



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Information and Support Help Sakhalin Woman Manage Asthma

For 43-year-old Irina Mogilyova, asthma is something she's had to live with for nearly half her life. "As a child, I never exhibited symptoms of asthma. It wasn't until I came down with pneumonia in my early twenties that I started to experience breathing problems," she explains. "After that, it seemed like every spring and autumn—sometimes even in the middle of winter—I would have difficulty catching my breath and a terrible tightness in my chest. This would go on for several days or even weeks before it would abate. The doctors I went to back then told me I had 'chronic bronchitis with asthma components' and gave me some medications that helped very little, if at all."

So, with her asthma by and large undiagnosed, Mogilyova suffered through the seasons, often missing days or weeks of work. Her condition also made it difficult to care for her son, who was 4 years old when she first started having problems breathing. "I really couldn't do much of anything during these attacks. I just had to stay at home resting, waiting for the symptoms to go away. Even a small amount of physical exertion would trigger an attack during these periods. After that, I knew that I would be okay for about six months or so before another bout," she says.

Usually when Mogilyova was in the midst of an attack, a doctor would come to her house to check on her and provide care. On several occasions, however, she was hospitalized because the symptoms were so severe. It was during a stay at Korsakov Rayon Hospital that she first encountered Natalya Kravtchenko, a primary care doctor who helped establish an Asthma Care Program at the affiliated polyclinic.

"It was pure luck that Natalya was my physician during that stay because not only did she provide effective care while I was hospitalized, she also told me that I did indeed have asthma and explained what I could do to manage it," Mogilyova recalls. "She taught me how to use an inhaler. I didn't know anything about this form of therapy then because I was always given injections and antibiotics. She also explained in great detail what asthma is and how I can make small



PHOTO: SUZANNE E. GRINNAN

Asthma patient Irina Mogilyova learned how to manage her condition thanks to Korsakov Hospital's Asthma Care Program.

lifestyle changes that can help prevent an attack," Mogilyova continues, pointing out that Kravtchenko was available, whether in person or over the phone, to answer any questions she had.

Learning how to manage her condition has made a world of difference, Mogilyova professes, noting, "It's so much more convenient to be able to use my inhaler at the first sign of an attack rather than having to always worry about whether I'd be able to get to the clinic or contact a doctor fast enough if I encountered difficulties breathing." The number of times she uses the inhaler depends on the season of the year and severity of her symptoms, Mogilyova says. "In autumn, I have to use it six times a day to prevent attacks, but then during the winter I can go days or even weeks without having to use it once. Because of my sessions with Natalya and the materials she gives me to read, I have learned what triggers my asthma and even the physical responses my body goes through when I am exposed to those triggers."

Living with a chronic disease can be a huge challenge for many people, especially if they don't understand their ailment or know what they can do to effectively manage it. For people living with asthma, the fear of what can trigger an acute attack—a dusty stack of books, a brisk walk to the corner store, a playful pet, or even a summer breeze—is ever-present. Instruction about clinical interventions, self-administered therapies, and preventive measures can make a world of difference in quality of life for asthma patients. This is the story of one Russian woman who turned to primary care specialists at the Korsakov Rayon Hospital and Polyclinic for help managing her asthma. The story of the physician who helped her appears on the other side.

Because Mogilyova also has high blood pressure, Dr. Kravtchenko worked closely with her to develop an approach that addresses both conditions. "When I am stressed or I overexert myself, this can prompt an asthma attack. Not being able to breathe properly then causes my blood pressure to go up. It is like each condition feeds off the other, so I have to manage both at the same time. Thanks to Natalya, I have been able to do it," Mogilyova says with gratitude.

"I guess I got used to the limitations I had to live with for so long because of my asthma," Mogilyova admits. "I couldn't go out with my friends after work, for example, or I had to have help taking care of my son. I would miss a lot of work, too, during certain months. Now, though, I haven't had to be hospitalized in quite some time and I am much more confident that I can handle things when I feel an attack coming on. I'm so happy that Natalya and the other physicians at the polyclinic are available to give me information and advice. I really believe that learning more about what asthma is—and how I can control it—has made a positive difference in my life."



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