

Kicking the Habit in Central Asia

By Joanne Neuber

The camera zooms in on a group of adolescents smoking in a crowded corridor. A heavy blue haze hangs over their heads. Suddenly the video cuts to a stark black-and-white poster of a child's head superimposed on a lit cigarette; below this image a warning label reads: "Smoking is harmful to your health." These are some of the images portrayed in the public service film that aired on Television Broadcasting Channel No. 6 in Semipalatinsk, Kazakstan last November to heighten public awareness of the dangers surrounding smoking. The video was sponsored by Santa Fe Pacific Gold Corporation of Albuquerque, New Mexico and is an outgrowth of the Semipalatinsk-Houston partnership. It was produced by Bakyt Tumenova, partner coordinator and head of Social Services Department, Semipalatinsk Oblast Administration.

Tumenova hopes that this and similar anti-smoking videos planned to hit the airwaves in Semipalatinsk oblast this year will help curb the rise in smoking. Over the past decade, the level of smoking in Kazakstan has increased, from an average annual cigarette consumption of 975 cigarettes per person in 1990 to 1,243 in 1994, according to a World Health Organization report. And in Semipalatinsk Oblast the rate of smoking has steadily increased, especially among younger teenagers. In 1996, an estimated 70 percent of adolescents (ages 9 to 16) in the oblast smoked. Approximately 8 percent of this total were 9- and 10-year-olds, according to Tatyana Khrmogina, MD, a physician at the Semipalatinsk Oblast Alcohol Clinic--a government-funded outpatient center that treats substance abuse patients, including smokers.

Khrmogina maintains that three primary factors influence the decision to smoke among the region's adolescents: curiosity, especially because of increased cigarette advertisements; the desire to defy what is deemed dangerous by authorities; and family influence. "Children of parents who smoke are at a greater risk to repeat these habits," Khrmogina says.

Promoting the prevention and cessation of smoking is the most effective means of improving the health of the public, according to a 1994 NIS-wide report by the Russian Federation Ministry of Health and Medical Industry. Smoking not only plays a role in the development of chronic lung disease and cancers of the respiratory system, but is the main contributing factor in about one-third of all cases of cardiovascular disease in the NIS, including stroke, sudden death, heart attack, peripheral vascular disease, and aortic aneurysm.

Targeting the youth of Semipalatinsk region is the key to improving the health of the Semipalatinsk population, Tumenova says. With this goal in mind, one of Tumenova's initial actions in preparing the video was to interview teens on the streets of Semipalatinsk. "For me, there is nothing more pleasing than having a cigarette. And the young girls find this attractive, too," says one adolescent boy. Data provided by Khrmogina suggest that an estimated 40 percent of adolescent females living in Semipalatinsk Oblast smoke.

A kiosk operator notes that she often sells cigarettes to adolescents. "Schoolchildren frequently purchase cigarettes [from me]...when their parents give them school money. They begin to smoke at an early age...as early as 10 years of age. This is very unpleasant to see," she says.

Kazakstan has not introduced legal codes to curb smoking in public places or to restrict the sale of cigarettes to adolescents, according to Pavel Brizhakhin, director of the Oblast Alcohol Clinic. Yet, Brizhakhin and others in the medical community hope to persuade local government officials to introduce smoke-free zones within the region. "Places like movie theaters, parks and common areas where our young people congregate...should be smoke-free zones," says Brizhakhin.

Brizhakhin also oversees the region's only addiction clinic, which recently introduced smoking cessation programs to help the oblast's smokers quit. One of his patients explains in the video how he quit smoking after 30 years. "I started to smoke less...and got down to smoking two to three cigarettes per day...It was, for me, a conscious desire to quit," he says, adding that his success at quitting has convinced his son not to smoke.

Last fall, AIHA partners from the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas participated in a smoking cessation sessions at the clinic. Baylor College of Medicine's Larry Laufman, formerly the coordinator of the smoking cessation program at the Methodist Hospital in Houston, Texas, was among the team of US physicians who talked with oblast clinicians and patients. "I told them that the person has to want to quit...they need to want it for themselves," Laufman says. As a former smoker himself, Laufman believes he can readily identify with some of the difficulties in quitting among his patients. "On average, a person will try to quit four to seven times before he is successful," he says.

Over the past 30 years the number of smokers in America has decreased, from an average 50 percent in the 1960s, to 30 percent today, due in part to the active involvement of leading health organizations like the American Cancer Society and other organizations, he says. The medical community in Semipalatinsk hopes to cite similar smoking declines through the introduction of public service announcements and increased governmental involvement in restricting smoking. In working towards that goal AIHA partners at the Semipalatinsk partnership hospitals have introduced a smoking ban in their hospitals.

Anti-Smoking Efforts in Bishkek

Visitors to Dr. Zakir Kamarli's office can't miss the large "No Smoking" sign prominently displayed on his desk--or the message it sends. Kamarli, who serves as the director of the Institute of Oncology and Radiology and partner coordinator in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, wants to raise public awareness of the dangers surrounding substance abuse, especially smoking. And as a former smoker, Kamarli is convinced that people can kick the habit and adopt healthier lifestyles.

"I decided to stop smoking when I became director of the Institute--and I feel much healthier now," Kamarli says.

Five years ago he created an anti-smoking campaign to raise local awareness of the dangers surrounding smoking, and appeared on television and radio talk shows in Bishkek to discuss the nation's rise in lung cancer and corresponding increase in foreign cigarette sales.

"Kyrgyzstan never had an anti-smoking campaign," he says. "And the government does not prohibit smoking because it relies on the revenue from the foreign cigarette advertising market and export of tobacco--which is one of Kyrgyzstan's most lucrative exports."

Kamarli's anti-smoking program builds on the health promotion programs begun in the early 1970s at the Institute of Oncology and Radiology. This program was created to respond to the noted increase in smoking in the Bishkek region, Kamarli notes. And although the Kyrgyz government does not calculate the level of smoking or its negative health effects, Kamarli is convinced that the rise in smoking is directly related to the increase in lung cancer in Kyrgyzstan, from the fifth leading form of cancer in 1970, to the second leading form of cancer in 1996. Smoking rates are rising in Kyrgyzstan, according to the World Health Organization, with an average 1,328 cigarettes smoked per person in 1994, about 200 more per year more than in 1990.

"Prevention is the key to success with our anti-smoking campaign," Kamarli notes.

Kamarli is especially concerned with the rise in smoking among teenagers, whom, he notes, are fascinated by western images of cowboys riding into the sunset with packs of their favorite cigarettes. He advocates cutting smoking among teens by curtailing cigarette advertising that targets this age group, and creating effective anti-smoking campaigns in schools and hospitals.

Since 1994, Kamarli has appeared on talk shows and aired three televised public service announcements and numerous radio and newspaper announcements to express his concern over the rise in lung cancer in his country and heighten local awareness of the risk of addiction to nicotine, the drug found in cigarettes. A \$6 million, July 1994 shipment by "Heart to Heart" humanitarian organization of donated pharmaceuticals by Marion Merrell Dow, a Kansas City-based pharmaceutical company, included 720 cases of anti-smoking "nicoderm" patches and users manuals to aid Kamarli's anti-smoking campaign.

Similar health promotion campaigns on smoking were held in five Bishkek schools. Targeting adolescents--the age group with one of the highest increases in smoking levels in the past five years--physicians from Kamarli's institute provided school children with information on the dangers of smoking and distributed posters, leaflets, American football jerseys and inflatable multicolored balls donated by the American Cancer Society to encourage youth not to smoke.

Staff and patient awareness of the dangers of smoking have also been heightened through various educational tools, including departmental newspapers and posters. Nursing staff at the Institutes play a vital role in educating patients about the dangers of smoking, and are like missionaries with important messages about the dangers of nicotine and smoking, says Tamara Saktanova, head specialist for nursing, Kyrgyz Ministry of Health. These programs have been "very effective" in increasing patient consultations with physicians on the dangers of tobacco consumption, Kamarli says.

Kamarli hopes to expand these programs to include early cancer screening and regular anti-smoking education programs. This information will be worked into the Institute's proposed primary care curriculum that is being created this year with the help of US partners at the University of Kansas Medical Center in Kansas.

Ultimately, Kamarli hopes for a decrease in diseases linked to smoking. "Those individuals who quit smoking are taking preventive measures against lung cancer and other illnesses," he says.