

Dubna's Adolescent Sexual Education Program

By Joanne Neuber

In the town of Dubna, Russia, the number of sexually active adolescent couples has increased greatly in the past three years. Pregnancies in which the mother is under 20 have also increased, comprising 18 percent of all pregnancies in Dubna in 1995. And health administrators have also noted a rise in the incidence of STD's among adolescents, which were 13 percent of all cases in 1995. Most adolescent couples faced with an unwanted pregnancy elect to have an abortion, which contributed greatly to the rise in the ratio of abortions to live births in Dubna, which was 3:1 from 1993 to 1995. These trends coincide with a national increase of sexually active adolescents - 20 percent since 1985. And only 7 to 11 percent of teenage couples in Russia use contraceptives initially, according to Vadim Lopukhin, MD, chief obstetrician/gynecologist at Savior's Hospital in Moscow, Russia.

"Our teenagers simply do not know what options are available to them to alleviate the risk of unwanted pregnancy or STDs," explained Julia Muravievskaya, partner information coordinator and a city health administrator in Dubna.

The partnership between Dubna and LaCrosse is addressing adolescent sexuality through its community-wide women's health initiative, which includes a comprehensive program on sexual education for girls from pre-school to early adulthood. Begun in spring 1995, this initiative has reduced by half the ratio of abortions to live births in Dubna this year.

"Our partners insist that this improvement is due to our contraceptive and sexual education programs which target the young adult population in the Dubna community," said US partner coordinator Sandra McCormick of Lutheran Hospital in LaCrosse, Wisconsin.

The program provides children, teens and young adults with information on reproductive health and healthy lifestyles, including the prevention of addiction to smoking, alcohol and narcotics; contraception and family planning; STDs; societal adjustment, depression and overcoming stress; sexual development; the birthing process; and responsible adult behavior.

A team of OB/GYN physicians from Dubna trained in LaCrosse using a model curriculum used in Wisconsin. Upon their return to Dubna in May 1995, they taught the initial comprehensive adolescent sex education programs in two local high schools. The curriculum was divided into ten 45-minute classes designed to educate youth on basic anatomy, reproductive health, AIDS, safe sex and healthy lifestyles.

Barbara Pretasky, project coordinator for the partnership at Lutheran Hospital, had the opportunity to observe one of the courses taught in School No. 8 in Dubna. "A very significant change in Dubna was the introduction of classes [for both boys and girls]," Pretasky said. "And that is important, because youth can learn from one another, despite their sex, and feel more comfortable talking about their sexuality."

However, Pretasky said the lack of involvement by local school teachers is a major obstacle that needs to be addressed. Currently, US partners are working with health care providers in the Dubna community to expand training to involve counselors, pediatricians and teachers. LaCrosse partners are also working with educators in Dubna to adapt brochures aimed at helping parents discuss sexuality with their teens.

Advertisements appear in the local newspaper and are broadcast on local television and radio shows to announce upcoming community information meetings and adolescent sex education courses. As a result, the program has since expanded to the nearby towns of Dmitrov, Zaprudnya and Taldom, Russia.

"There is great interest among the youth in these towns. Teenagers felt comfortable and asked a lot of questions about reproductive health - questions, which, earlier, would not have been asked," Muravievskaya said.

The partnership also created two women's health centers in Hospital No. 9 and Central City Hospital in Dubna. These centers, which cover a variety of women's health topics, also provide adolescents with information about reproductive health. Nurses working at the hospitals have become patient educators, noted Pretasky. The newest addition to Dubna's sex ed program will be included in the Women's Health Center at the University of Dubna, scheduled to open this fall.