

## Restraining the Rise of STDs

*By Barbara Ruben*

In Moldova, young adults are tuning into new television and radio programs with titles like "Love, Sex and Contraception" and "Modern Club," which feature frank discussions of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and family planning. Over the summer, a new campaign organized by the Russian Ministry of Health and the French organization Doctors Without Borders blanketed Moscow with pamphlets, bus ads and billboards all emblazoned with the slogan, "Safe Sex, My Choice." These and other projects in the NIS are aimed at slowing the rapidly escalating rate of sexually transmitted diseases by educating residents about the importance of using condoms and signs of such diseases as AIDS, hepatitis and chlamydia.

For example, the incidence of syphilis in Russia is 40 times higher than just eight years ago, and 100 times higher than that in the European Union, according to the World Health Organization. HIV infection has risen similarly: In the first four months of 1997 1,300 people were diagnosed with HIV, nearly as many as during all of 1996, according to Russian Health Ministry reports. Moldova's syphilis rate is nearly 25 times higher than a decade ago, according to WHO, and although there is only one reported case of AIDS, HIV has skyrocketed from 47 cases last year to 147 for the first six months of 1997, the Moldova Ministry of Health reported.

To help control the sudden rise in STDs, partnerships---mainly through new Women's Wellness Centers--are providing education, screening and treatment. Sexually transmitted diseases have a greater impact on women because they cause pregnancy-related complications, premature birth and stillbirth. Women are also biologically more susceptible than men to becoming infected if exposed to an STD. For example, a woman's risk of contracting gonorrhea from one act of unprotected intercourse is as high as 90 percent, while the risk to a man is about 30 percent, according to a US Institute of Medicine report. And STDs are less likely to produce symptoms in women and are therefore more difficult to diagnose until serious problems develop. Up to 80 percent of chlamydia infections in women are asymptomatic, for example, compared with 40 percent in men.

In addition, STDs most frequently infect young people between the ages of 15 to 24, according to the United Nations Population Fund. Half of the HIV infections worldwide are in this age group. Although gender-specific statistics are rarely available, one recent UN report indicates that 23 of every 1,000 girls under 16 in Ukraine have syphilis, more than twice the rate of the population as a whole.

Part of the rise in STDs can be attributed to the fact that more younger teens are becoming sexually active.

"There is some sort of sense of de-repression. This is like the late 1960s and early 1970s in America. Try to imagine the summer of love without the love, just sex," said journalist Laurie Garrett, who interviewed scores of teens, drug addicts and prostitutes during a three-month trip to the NIS and CEE last spring.

### **Women's Health Centers Provide Testing and Education**

In Chisinau, Moldova, the Women's Wellness Center, which opened in June, screens women for a variety of STDs. Testing for syphilis is mandatory by law, which may have led to a slight decrease in number of cases in the country this year, said center director Boris Gilca, MD. However, recent reports have indicated that more than a third of the growing population of homeless children in the city are infected with syphilis.

"One of our priority activities is prevention diagnosis and treatment of STDs," he said. The center uses materials prepared by the non-profit Family Planning Association of Moldova in its classes to teach women about the threat of STDs.

Despite the growing incidence of STDs, a stigma still associated with the diseases, Gilca said. "Usually women and men are reluctant to talk about their problems. Sometimes they don't contact a doctor for treatment and use self-treatment. All this is fraught by serious consequences," such as more serious infections by taking the wrong drugs and a greater possibility of infecting others, he said.

Unlike many other NIS nations, Armenia's statistics reflect a stable and relatively low STD rate. For example, Armenia's syphilis rate in 1995 was 12 per 100,000, according to WHO, while Moldova's rate was 174 per 100,000. Armenia's gonorrhea rate was 35 per 100,000 compared with 100 per 100,000 in Moldova. The rate of neonatal herpes--in which babies are infected with the herpes virus during passage through the birth canal--affects about 10 of every 100,000 infants, only about one-fifth of the worldwide rate.

"Nonetheless it is very important to educate patients about STDs," said Karine Sarkissian, MD, administrative director of the Women's Wellness Center. She noted one troubling factor as the low use of condoms. Hripsime Nazarian, MD, head epidemiologist at Yerevan's Emergency Hospital, questioned the low rates reflected in the statistics. Because some infected patients do not seek treatment, they are not reflected in official statistics on STD rates, she said.

Women at the center are routinely screened for a number of STDs, from chlamydia to trichomoniasis, most of which have remained stable or fallen between 1996 and the first months of 1997.

In Moscow, Savior's Hospital for Peace and Charity has initiated a number of programs that reach out to young women at risk for STDs. Through work with their partners at Magee-Women's Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Savior's Woman and Family Education Center targets teens for education about STDs. The 2,300 adolescents who visit the center each year are screened for a number of STDs and given condoms. Educators from Savior's also travel to Moscow schools to teach teens about safe sex and other issues. In September, Savior's released a new video discussing both family planning and STD issues.

"There's been a great rise in teen sex and a rise in STDs," said Melissa Zahniser, program coordinator for Magee Womancare International. For example, the number of teen cases of chlamydia seen at the clinic nearly doubled between 1995 and 1996, from 37 cases to 72 cases. In 1995, the clinic saw just one case of herpes, but last year there were three. However, the number of cases of trichomoniasis has fallen, she said.

Zahniser cautioned that although a strong network of women's health centers may help slow the spread of STDs that men must also be included in the cure.

"The hole in the process is that men are not being treated. Many times they want to keep the problem under wraps. And services have not been as planned out as they have been for women," she said. "But if you want to make sure that the same people aren't getting infected over and over again, you've got to make sure that both partners are diagnosed and treated and learn about precautions."