

Training and New-Found Optimism Lead to Success for a Mid-level Health Professional and Her Patients

Being a nurse or a feldsher—a medical professional akin to a physician's assistant in the United States—was usually a dead-end career path under the Soviet system of healthcare. Responsibilities for each of these professions were limited and room for advancement and participation in the decision-making process was often nonexistent. For 48-year-old Olga Vetokhina, a feldsher and midwife at a women's clinic in Dubna, a Russian city near Moscow, taking orders from doctors and doing some minor clerical work unrelated to the provision of patient care constituted the bulk of her duties. This all began to change, however, in 1991 when, in response to a growing need in the commu-



PHOTO: COURTESY OF OLGA VETOKHINA. Olga Vetokhina (far left) and Nina Koposova (second from left), a pediatrician and endocrinologist at the Dubna Diabetes Education Center, discuss ways of managing the disease with two young "students" and their mothers.

nity, Olga became involved in an informal support program geared to help diabetics and their families better manage their illness.

"At that time, care for diabetics was limited to occasional examinations and monitoring of blood sugar levels conducted by physicians," Vetokhina explains, noting that long waits and severe diabetes-related complications that resulted in frequent hospitalizations were commonplace. "It was obvious that something had to be done to fill the void in both treatment and management of diabetes." A year after she became involved with a loosely knit support group formed by parents of diabetic children, Vetokhina began working with the newly formed Dubna/La Crosse partnership.

"When we started working with our La Crosse partners in 1992, we made it a priority to create a program that gives diabetes patients the knowledge and confidence to become actively responsible for their own health." This program soon evolved into the Dubna Diabetes Education Center.

But patients were not the only ones to benefit from new-found knowledge and confidence. Through professional exchanges at partner institutions in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and at the International Diabetes Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Vetokhina's attitude toward patient care and her role as a healthcare provider began to change. "It is impossible to overestimate the value of the training I received through these two partnership exchanges," she says. "I was able to absorb and digest a wealth of clinical information and methods of educating patients on how they can control their diabetes, rather than having it control them."

Vetokhina is now the manager of the Diabetes Education Center and has made significant contributions to its overall productivity and sustainability. Her duties include triaging patients according to what type of diabetes they have, teaching education and outreach classes, and overseeing a variety of other management activities such as maintaining patient records, class timetables, and physician scheduling, as well as monitoring and reporting the Center's progress to the World Health Organization. The transition from someone who merely followed orders to a strong and efficient administrator who plays an integral role in both patient care and the decision-making process would not have been possible, she says, without her involvement in AIHA's Dubna/La Crosse partnership.

Vetokhina's personal and professional growth is mirrored by the success of the Diabetes Education Center itself. "Our accomplishments have been very impressive. We've seen a 30 percent decrease in the use of insulin along with substantial decreases in hospitalizations and length of stays as a result of our efforts," she notes. Their achievements were so impressive, in fact,

Based on peer-to-peer relationships, AIHA partnerships focus on developing solutions to healthcare delivery problems that are technologically and economically sustainable in the host country. By assessing the unique needs of the population in Dubna, Russia, for example, AIHA's Dubna/La Crosse partners determined that diabetes was a significant problem among citizens in the community. They responded by creating the Dubna Diabetes Education Center to teach diabetics, their families, and local healthcare providers about a variety of lifestyle choices that can play an important part in the management of this disease. This resulted not only in patients taking a more active role in their own care, but also in radical changes in the attitudes and responsibilities of healthcare providers. Below is the story of one such professional; the story of how she touched the lives of one family in her community is on the other side.

that the Center served as a model for similar programs established throughout Russia.

Explaining that motivating patients to view diabetes as a lifestyle rather than a disease is one reason for the improvements, Vetokhina says. "In the past, patients were passive and uninformed . . . now we teach them self-evaluation skills that make it possible for them to adjust their levels of insulin and prevent severe diabetes-related complications. They themselves are becoming healthcare workers."

Despite all the successes, the Center—along with Dubna's diabetic population—still faces some hardships, according to Vetokhina. "It's not always easy to obtain high-quality insulin or glucometers given the economic situation, but we feel able to overcome these obstacles, thanks to what we have learned through our partnership and, in part, to our new-found American optimism."

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