

Helping Young Asthma Patients Breathe Easier



Dr. Munira Baizhanova examines a young patient at the Republican Institute for Pediatrics and Children's Surgery.

Dr. Munira Baizhanova's patients claim that she possesses a "spark from God." She knows how to treat a condition with the most advanced and effective methods, yet she is warm and caring, always taking time to fully explain diagnoses and treatment options to her young patients and their parents. Currently the chief pediatric pulmonologist of the Ministry of Health of Kazakstan and chairperson of the Republican Institute for Pediatrics and Children's Surgery's pulmonology department, Baizhanova has been treating children with respiratory ailments for more than 25 years. Her wealth of experience, however, has not dampened her quest for improving her skills and bringing the most modern and effective remedies to her charges. That, she notes, was one of the reasons she was so enthusiastic about working with her counterparts from Arizona when the Institute became part of AIHA's Almaty/Tucson partnership in 1992.

"Through our partnership with Tucson, I had access to the most up-to-date medical literature and Internet resources, as well as the opportunity to conduct consultations with experts from the United States and all over the world," says Baizhanova, stressing how important this was given the fact that the most severe pediatric respiratory cases in Kazakstan were routinely referred to the Center.

of prevention regimens and had previously not been an accepted practice in Kazakstan. "Without a doubt, our involvement with this partnership radically improved the way we deal with children who have asthma," Baizhanova states, explaining, "In the past, we basically provided emergency care when our patients had a severe attack. Of course, we still do that, but now we also treat asthma more proactively by teaching patients and their families how they can help prevent attacks by using nebulizers and making lifestyle changes such as avoiding things—cigarette smoke and pets, for example—that can trigger asthma."

Eventually, this patient education program took the form of an "Asthma School" that soon provided ample evidence of the effectiveness of the new treatment and prevention protocols, according to Baizhanova. Impressive reductions in asthma-related hospitalizations, length of stays, and frequent severe attacks helped Baizhanova and the Institute staff convince colleagues throughout Kazakstan that the new protocols should be implemented at other facilities.

"It was a challenge. . . older physicians were especially reluctant to use steroid hormones, but our department proved again and again how effective these drugs are," she says, noting that training seminars for practitioners have been held in many regions of the Republic.

During professional exchanges, Baizhanova saw firsthand the benefits of treating asthma attacks with steroid inhalers, which—according to Western protocols—are also an important component

Educating people and introducing them to new concepts, methods, and technologies provides them with the tools they need to make better lifestyle choices and improve their overall well-being. When dealing with a chronic illness such as asthma, this knowledge can mean the difference between an active, productive life and an existence fraught with frequent hospitalizations and constant worry about when the next severe attack will strike. AIHA partners at the Republican Institute for Pediatrics and Children's Surgery are filling a void in their community by training young asthma patients—more than 200 children in the year 2001 alone—and their families to adopt a systematic, proactive approach to prevention and treatment, rather than reacting to attacks after they have already begun. This is the story of one doctor and her efforts to introduce new protocols that help children with asthma control their illness and lead happier, healthier lives; the story of one of her young patients is on the other side.*

"We are very happy with the way asthma is managed here, but we still have much work to do," Baizhanova continues. "We have learned that we can control the attacks, but our real goal is to change our patients' attitudes and orient them toward healthier lifestyle choices, which include following through with treatment regimens. All too often, parents discontinue the prescribed medication as soon as their children begin to feel better—that's not preventing future attacks and it's a problem we are working to solve at the Asthma School."

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