

## Making Pregnancy and Childbirth a Family Affair

When Larisa Cheprasova first witnessed prenatal classes for prospective parents, visited birthing rooms, and viewed deliveries at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia, she immediately began conceiving the possibility of implementing such a program back home. A midwife at Kiev's Maternity Hospital #6 for 10 years, the 31-year-old Cheprasova was introduced to the concept of family births—when fathers learn how to support and assist their partners throughout pregnancy and to take an active role during labor and delivery—during an AIHA partnership exchange in 1993.



Larisa Cheprasova, a midwife at Kiev Maternity Hospital #6, teaches a class at the Kiev WWC's "School for Young Parents," which prepares couples for family births.

"I'm a very curious person and this was such a new and interesting idea," Cheprasova states. "I knew nothing like this existed in Ukraine and, without delay, I began asking questions of the staff at the hospital in Philadelphia. I also started gathering as much information as possible to educate myself and help me determine how the program could be adapted to the situation and mentality in Kiev."

Armed with what she had learned and the belief that such a program could make an important contribution to the well-being

of mothers and infants alike, Cheprasova broached the idea with her colleagues at the Maternity Hospital, using the literature and videos she collected to support her suggestion. "At first, I thought the medical staff would oppose the program—after all, it was so radically different from what we were used to and practically unheard of in the former Soviet Union. So I prepared myself for total rejection," she admits. But her pessimism proved unfounded and the project was approved.

After several months of preparation and training, including a visit to AIHA partnership facilities in Moscow where similar programs were already established, the Kiev WWC's "School for Young Parents" accepted its first students in December 1994. "That first year went smoothly and, after a few of the fathers participated in the birthing process by acting as labor and delivery coaches, even the people who were initially against the program came to see that it was effective," she says, noting that impressive successes such as a 13 percent decrease in perinatal mortality between 1994 and 1995 underscored its value.

The school offers three two-hour classes a week, either eight sessions for women in their first and second trimesters or four sessions for those in their third trimester. Each group consists of 15 people on average—usually couples, but sometimes women who come alone or are accompanied by family or friends—and is taught by Cheprasova.

"These courses are important for women regardless of whether or not their husbands choose to take part in the actual birth," she explains. "The women who have attended the classes say that it is much easier to give birth after training . . . because they do not experience the fear that comes from going through delivery alone. The presence of a husband or loved one enhances a woman's belief in her own ability, and the coach helps her follow the instructions of the midwife or obstetrician."

Seeing her idea through and knowing that she plays an important role for so many young women and men has made a real difference in how she views her profession, Cheprasova says. "I've noticed a big

The birth of a child is often one of the most momentous occasions life has to offer. Sharing the joys of the event—and having a supportive partner to help ease any pain and stress—can mean the difference between a positive experience and a frightening, lonely ordeal. AIHA partnership Women's Wellness Centers (WWCs) are striving to ensure that pregnancy and birth are safe, uplifting experiences by offering "Partners in Birth," a program that is bringing the concept of family birth to maternity hospitals throughout the NIS and CEE. At the Kiev WWC, for example, more than 1,800 couples have participated in prenatal classes at the Center's "School for Young Parents." This is the story of the midwife who helped develop and implement the program; the story of one couple who attended her classes and shared in the birth of their first child is on the other side.

difference over the past seven years . . . patients who are well-informed, comfortable, and confident generally have an easier time during labor and delivery. This makes our work more calm and relaxed . . . even the children are better served because the deliveries are quicker." But her greatest professional achievement, she notes, came when one of the physicians who was a vociferous opponent of the program recommended that some of his friends attend the classes. "Witnessing firsthand the joy the parents experienced being together at the time of birth convinced him that it was worthwhile and this show of support and acceptance from someone who so strongly opposed the idea is the second-best validation I could ever receive." The first, she says with a smile, is watching couples she has trained work together to bring their children into the world.

For more information  
on AIHA visit  
[www.aiha.com](http://www.aiha.com).

