

The Dubna Alcohol Project

By Joanne Neuber

Vitaly is a recovering alcoholic who lives in the northern Russian Federation town of Zaprudnya. Just three years ago, he considered suicide his only alternative to living through the current socioeconomic crisis. And then he learned about the newly created Alcoholics Anonymous program in Zaprudnya. After drinking for more than 40 years--since he was 12-- Vitaly has overcome his drinking habit, and has remained sober for the past three years.

"For the first time, I felt like I was actually living," Vitaly told his colleagues and alcohol counselors at a recent alcohol anonymous group session at the Zaprudnya Alcohol Center, one of six set up through the LaCrosse/Russia Alcohol Project, an outgrowth of the AIHA Dubna-LaCrosse hospital partnership.

The centers provide weekly group, peer and community outreach alcohol training programs to various age groups and are supported by a \$500,000 grant from USAID to World Learning, a non-governmental organization located in Washington, DC (see box, page 11).

"Our centers treat alcoholics differently than the community used to treat them. We have an attitude of 'we want to help you and your family.' People do not fear us...they come to us for help," said Natalya Zakarova, alcohol counselor at the center in Dmitrov.

And this is an important first step in breaking certain cultural barriers and recognizing alcoholism as a social problem that affects the entire community, said Barbara Pretasky, PhD, coordinator of the LaCrosse/Russia Alcohol Project in LaCrosse, Wisconsin.

"There used to be very little acceptance of alcoholism as a disease; alcoholics were shunned by society...and excessive consumption was treated as a crime," Pretasky said.

The Soviet legal code placed heavy restrictions on individuals suffering from alcoholism, and punished those found on the streets under the influence of alcohol by throwing them in jail to "dry out," Pretasky said. Yet, this and recent Russian Federation laws did not abate the rise in alcohol consumption, which rose to an average 4.1 gallons of spirits per person per year in 1995, giving the Russian Federation one of the highest alcohol consumption rates in the world, according to a 1995 Ministry of Health report. Approximately five percent of Russia's population are alcoholics, according to a 1994 report by the International Journal of the Addictions. Yet there are regional differences; for example, in Dubna, an estimated 11.6 percent of the population are alcoholics, according to Olga Vasiutina, a counselor at the Dubna center.

And while many other goods have become difficult to obtain because of skyrocketing prices in recent years, the price of alcohol has risen much more slowly. By 1994, although the consumer price index rose, the relative alcoholic beverage price fell, according to a report by the Russian Federation Public Association of Health and Environment. Greater availability has led to a greater incidence of alcohol poisonings, which rose by 25 percent between 1994 and 1995, and was particularly acute among adolescents, according to a Health Ministry report.

Nearly everyone's family has been hit with the tragedy of alcoholism, according to Ludmilla Soutchkova, director and alcohol counselor at the Zaprudnya center. "We just used to live with it. Now we have hope."

Counselors at the alcohol centers--in Dubna, Taldom, Sergiyev Posad, Klin, Dmitrov and Zaprudnya--want to change the image of alcoholism and improve lifestyles of future

generations, notes Zakarova, who completed an intensive, two-week advanced alcohol counselor training program in LaCrosse in February with her colleagues from the six centers.

Each center is supported by the local health administration and run by a core group of alcohol counselors and trained at LaCrosse hospital partnerships in prevention education, curriculum development and one-on-one counseling. Center directors coordinate their respective series of patient-run Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) support groups for recovering alcoholics; Al-Anon support groups for families of alcoholics; and Alateen support groups for adolescents. Additionally, the centers conduct women's support services, and hold monthly public sessions to encourage additional recovering alcoholics and family members learn about the centers' recovery programs.

"Our AA members will go on TV and share their experiences to help others in the community. They are not ashamed and this helps some who are afraid," said Natalia Semenova, an alcohol counselor at the Dubna Center.

Counselors regularly conduct media campaigns and host lectures at various high schools in the Moscow region to promote heightened awareness and prevention among adolescents. More than 2,100 individuals in the Dubna community (population 67,000) have contacted the center for information in the past six months.

"Our children can be saved from this horror...if enough of us join hands and hearts and hold on to one another to help. We have seen a difference in the few--it is exciting to believe that some day we will see the difference in the many," says Nadezhda Smirnova, director and alcohol counselor of the Dmitrov Center.