



## INACTION IN THE FACE OF HIV FOSTERS DISCRIMINATION:

### CROATIANS DECIDE TO TAKE ISSUE HEAD ON

Croatia is approximately one-tenth the size of Ukraine, both in terms of territory and population, and has about one-thousandth the number of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). In Croatia, only 0.1 percent of the population of 4.5 million is infected with the disease, which amounts to fewer than 400 cases. Taken at face value, it would seem that Croatians do not need to worry about HIV/AIDS, which appears to be under control in their country. Despite the low incidence of HIV, however, it has become clear that Croatians have a great fear of this disease and that those who suffer the most as a result of this fear are those who, because they are HIV-positive, are subjected to ostracism and discrimination by their compatriots.

The question of how to root out the stigmatization of PLWHA was publicly raised in Croatia at an AIHA-sponsored meeting, held April 26-27, 2004, in Zagreb. Taking part were representatives from the media, healthcare institutions, legislature, and numerous non-governmental HIV service organizations.

According to conference participant Rok Èivljak, a doctor at the Fran Mihaljevic Clinical Hospital—the only medical institution in Croatia that provides healthcare to HIV-positive patients—the first overt wave of discrimination toward PLWHA rolled across the country in 2002, when a local newspaper published the photographs of two orphaned, HIV-positive little girls who had been adopted by a family so that they could grow up in a “normal” environment. A story that should have engendered good will toward this couple who had done such a good deed created a stir and brought out much hatred. All of the parents and teachers at the school where one of the girls was enrolled became enraged and neighbors, who saw these nice little girls as carriers of a terrible disease, decided to mobilize against this dangerous threat to their community. The groups presented the local government with an ultimatum: remove the children from the district or relocate the entire healthy population.

Èivljak believes that this situation could have been avoided had the local newspaper observed ethical standards in their journalism. At the same time, he thinks the panic was caused by the local population’s total lack of knowledge about HIV and how it is transmitted. Many people, including medical professionals, believe HIV is an airborne disease that can be contracted simply by being in an infected person’s presence.

“Why complain only about the local population when even doctors are biased against, and hesitant toward, people who



During a meeting in Zagreb, a discussion focused on the Catholic Church’s stance on offering HIV prevention education programs to school children.

Photo: Vira Illiash.

treat HIV-positive patients?” Èivljak asks, explaining that he has repeatedly experienced situations in which a friendly conversation with a colleague suddenly breaks off at the point he acknowledges working with PLWHA. “Many doctors and medical students have never actually seen a person with HIV, so they have a mental image of something absolutely terrible,” he emphasizes, recalling that in the early 1990s, healthcare workers donned special protective suits before examining HIV-positive patients. “This stereotype persists in the psychology of many people to this day,” says Èivljak, again citing the healthcare personnel’s inadequate knowledge in this area.

### WORKING WITH THE MEDIA TO PREVENT DISCRIMINATION

How to educate the population was discussed extensively at the Zagreb meeting. By and large, participants leaned toward the conclusion that mass media should assume the role of educator. Participating journalists themselves acknowledged that the media has concentrated far more on sensational stories about HIV, remembering only on December 1—World AIDS Day—that their audiences also need factual information.

Representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the meeting also brought up the problem of providing sex education to young adults, which many said is not available for students at most high schools or universities. Underlying this situation is the Catholic Church’s ban on sex education, which is against its moral precepts. Meanwhile, life goes on, and the latest medical survey data gathered at Zagreb National University shows that 25 percent of the female student body has contracted a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

Many of the journalists, in turn, complained that the language used by healthcare professionals who provide information on

HIV is not always understandable due to an excessive use of clinical terminology, which often makes the material difficult to grasp. The result is that what is said often only reaches a small group of people.

Further discussion centered around the unacceptability of using offensive terms—which occurs widely in the media—to refer to PLWHA or other vulnerable groups. To address this issue, the Andrija Stampar School of Public Health with funding from AIHA has authored a guideline for journalists to help them understand basic concepts about HIV and its transmission routes—as well as how to prevent transmission—and offered suggestions for how to avoid using language that promotes discrimination and negative attitudes toward PLWHA and the disease.

In accordance with generally-accepted international standards, the guideline will set forth terminology that refers to sexual minorities, PLWHA, injecting drug users, and other socially vulnerable segments of the population with sensitivity and in a way that preserves their dignity.

### LAWS AND THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ISOLATION

The creation of laws to defend the rights of PLWHA was another subject of intense discussion during the workshop. According to Xenia Turkovic, a professor at the Zagreb School of Law and one of the country's leading specialists in the area of medical law, Croatia has a major problem with the violation of medical confidentiality when it comes to HIV-positive patients. This has deplorable consequences for PLWHA and often results in their losing their jobs, being persecuted by the local community, and being refused medical services at non-specialized facilities.



Posters announcing the HIV/AIDS Stigma and Discrimination Workshop and Roundtable were posted all over the city and in local newspapers. They promote “Knowledge Against Fear.”

Telling workshop participants during her talk that “There is not a single [openly] HIV-positive person at our meeting today, although it was announced by the mass media,” Turkovic says that this “shows once again how strong the social stigma attached to people living with HIV is, as well as the extreme social isolation in which they live.”

NGO representatives also voiced concern about the isolation of PLWHA and their lack of representation at the meeting. In particular, United Nations Development Program Representative Jadranka Mimica noted that the more a society discriminates against a sector of the population, the less likely a person from a marginalized group is to look for or find information that can protect them. As an example she cited the latest research showing that the majority of men who have sex with men do not use condoms because they are ignorant about the transmission routes of STIs, including HIV, or lack knowledge about prevention methods. Unfortunately, “because these men carefully conceal their sexual orientation, various HIV service organizations are not able to reach them to provide them with this vitally important information,” she emphasizes. Such organizations could help these men—who often seek partners abroad—learn how to avoid a sexually transmitted infection. Mimica is convinced that, “if these men’s rights were not being violated, Croatia would benefit. First of all, many of them would have a steady sexual partner, which would reduce the risk of HIV transmission and second, the not insubstantial funds that sexual minorities spend to travel abroad and pay for services would remain in Croatia.”

### MOVING FORWARD

In addition to endorsing the development of the guideline for journalists, participants decided to unite their efforts to fight the stigmatization and discrimination associated with HIV and established an interdisciplinary committee comprised of representatives from various segments of society to lobby for the rights of PLWHA. It is expected that this body will coordinate the efforts of healthcare and educational institutions, the mass media, and local NGOs to carry out public education campaigns designed to inform the Croatian population about HIV and how it is transmitted.

“Stigma is the curtain that separates the audience from the stage, where the real action is taking place,” says Stipe Oreskovic, head of the Andrija Stampar School of Public Health, asserting his belief that “If we [effectively] remove the stigma, we open ourselves up to a world where people do not need to hide from each other, and instead learn how to live together in a society where no one’s rights are violated, even when that may contradict someone else’s self interest or beliefs.” ■