

First Ladies Speak Out on Women's Health

CommonHealth asked First Ladies in the NIS and CEE to talk about women's health in their nations and their work in health promotion for families. The First Ladies of Kazakhstan and Latvia submitted written answers to a set of questions. Future issues of CommonHealth will include interviews with other First Ladies.

Sara Nazarbaeva, First Lady of Kazakhstan

What are the most important health issues facing women in your nation?

Kazakhstan is moving toward a market economy. It is well known that everything that is new suffers "growing pains." In such times, life is especially difficult for women. They are working in factories on equal footing with men. They also must take care of their families and children. There is no time to think about one's health, although there are many problems, such as the extremely high level of abortions, and an increase in breast and reproductive system cancers. Unfortunately, there is a growth of sexually transmitted disease as well. In several rural regions there are practically no healthy women; many of them suffer from anemia. This is because of unfavorable ecological conditions left as an inheritance from the past.

How are you using your role as First Lady to advocate women's health issues?

We have established the charity foundation Bobek (Baby) for the children of Kazakhstan, and I serve as its president. Its work is directed toward the children, and hence toward the families and the moms of these families. It is very important for women to know how to support their own and their children's health and how to provide good nutrition for their families.

Our foundation is closely collaborating with the Republican Center of Mothers' and Children's Health Care, whose primary mission is the care of pregnant women and those with gynecological diseases. We have several joint projects, which, when fulfilled, will improve the situation.

If you could alleviate one health challenge confronting women in your country, what would you choose?

Currently, our foundation pays a great deal of attention to the education and upbringing of children and teenagers. They are our future, our hope. The future of the country depends much upon how we manage to teach our children to preserve their health while they are young.

I would like to start more consistent and systematic work with teenagers, with young girls and younger children. It is very important to make them enthusiastic about good health, which is so important for a life full of value. I want to show them the dangers of smoking, alcoholism and drug addiction. It is necessary to explain to the young people in an attractive way the rules of private hygiene and safe sex (if it is not possible to avoid it before marriage).

I hope for the collaboration in this field with AIHA, which has experience in publicizing of healthy lifestyles among the population.

Kazakhstan has an enormous amount of territory and a low density of population. That is why the inhabitants of distant rural regions do not have any modern information about healthy lifestyles and about their responsibility to preserve their own health and that of their children. In these conditions, it is very important to organize with the help of mass media a wide-scale public education program.

Aina Ulmane, First Lady of Latvia

What are the most important health issues facing women in your nation?

Women's health and health problems reflect the current situation in our health care system and the impact of the environment and economic conditions on health. Hospitals are short of funds, and a large number of vulnerable people cannot afford the high cost of health care. People are also lost in the ever-changing labyrinths of the health care system - they are not sure where and to whom to turn. As a result, people seldom visit doctors; according to an opinion poll, no respondents had visited a health care institution within the last two weeks to seek preventive care, only to treat an actual health problem. Taking responsibility and understanding their own health is not valued. This, unfortunately, refers in large part to women.

It is painful to note that would-be mothers are becoming less responsible. Women enter pregnancy unprepared and in ill health, and diagnosis is often delayed. We have a large number of would-be mothers who have high-risk pregnancies, and there are many complicated births that result in maternal deaths.

We have an inexcusably high number of pregnancies that are artificially interrupted; according to statistics, there are 114 abortions for every 100 live births. This, in combination with sexually transmitted diseases, results in serious complications and even in barrenness in women.

The main problem lies in a careless lifestyle, facilitated by the social and economic situation, inferior nutrition, gaps in education, as well as an insufficient national framework for preventive measures.

How are you using your role as First Lady to advocate women's health issues?

I think that issues of women's health, like general health issues, must be solved with combined efforts - the state, physicians and women themselves must contribute to seeking solutions. However, as the first lady tends to be the focus of public attention, her opinion and presence add a certain weight to this issue. Although she is not able to directly influence solutions to a particular problem, her opinion is taken into account.

During visits and meetings of high-level statesmen and officials, their spouses have special itineraries, often focused on children and health care issues. As a most successful example of this I would like to mention the cooperative program between the Latvian and St. Louis, Missouri hospitals. The program was initiated in July 1994 when US President Bill Clinton and Mrs. Clinton visited Latvia. Within the framework of this visit, Mrs. Clinton was presented with a review of the health care situation in Latvia, and, following her recommendations, AIHA considered cooperative opportunities with Latvia. In June 1995, a partnership agreement between three Latvian and three St. Louis hospitals was signed in the White House, with Mrs. Clinton's and my participation.

This program pays particular attention to the health care issues of women, children and the elderly. I believe that women's health is closely linked with children's health issues. A mother's health has an impact on her child's health, both physically and spiritually, and a mother has a responsibility to educate her child about healthy behaviors.

I am doing my utmost to attract the media's attention regarding the joint efforts of these medical personnel, so that they do not remain neglected by society at large.

If you could alleviate one health challenge confronting women in your country, what would you choose?

It would be really difficult for me to select a particular health problem as each of them are important, and I believe that a solution to one particular problem will not bring adequate results.

I have always emphasized that the family is responsible for the health of the next generation. Children's health, and thus the health of the next generation, depends largely on the mother's health. Thus, parents in each family, thinking about the future of our nation, must acknowledge the value of their children's health and teach them responsibility for their own health.