

Creating Healthy Families and Encouraging Future Doctors: Kurgan Maternity Hospital's Programs Educate Teens

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Photos: Olga Perminova

Left—During a practical training class held in the Pregnancy Pathology Department at the Kurgan Maternity Hospital, schoolgirls observe a pregnant woman being prepared for an IV. Right—Teenagers participating in the Kurgan LRC's outreach efforts hold a neonate in their arms.

In Kurgan, Russia, staff at the local maternity hospital have long realized that the town's young people are, by and large, ill prepared to become parents. School curricula neglect sexual education issues and, for a variety of reasons, parents are often unwilling to discuss such matters with their children. Consequently, it came as no surprise that a series of health assessment surveys conducted by the Kurgan-Schuche/Appleton partners indicate that teens have a very low level of awareness of topics such as family planning, contraception, the harmful effect of abortion, and other similar issues. The same surveys also reveal that young adults have a marked interest in these topics, as well as a high level of dissatisfaction with the absence of reliable sources of information.

Creating "Healthy Families"

When the healthcare partnership between the Russian towns of Kurgan and Schuche and Appleton, Wisconsin, was formed in

August 1999, a program called "Healthy Family" was launched to help strengthen the Kurgan Maternity Hospital's efforts to create a favorable setting for the birth and development of physically and mentally healthy children. Soon after its inception, Healthy Family was given official status as a program and, accordingly, administrative and financial support. An important part of this program is educating teens about reproductive health.

The Learning Resource Center (LRC) at the Maternity Hospital compiled the data from the initial health assessments and, based on the results, developed a plan for a series of lectures to be held at local educational institutions. The LRC also began the monumental task of collecting information and materials to be presented at the lectures and assembling a team of lecturers from the hospital's staff. In September 1999, this plan was submitted to teachers and parents at several area schools where the response was mixed. Some people said

the plan would lead to the demoralization of the community's youth and claimed that life is already difficult enough for adolescents so "why burden them further with adult problems." Others reacted positively—even enthusiastically—to the prospect of educational programs. In the end, the Healthy Family concept was approved and launched at the City Training College.

Since that time, more than 3,000 teenagers between 14 and 19 have attended Healthy Family classes held at four Kurgan schools and two colleges; and 20 Maternity Hospital staff members have taken part in program implementation efforts.

In keeping with the program's focus on reproductive health and general promotion of healthy lifestyles, the subjects covered by the lectures include family planning, women's health, men's health, sexually transmitted infections, contraception, the culture of sexual relations, and the adverse effects of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. The didactic materials are not static, but are

constantly supplemented and adjusted—often with the help of the teens themselves. Student response is used as an indicator of learning efficiency for all assessments and discussions, and potential interest in other topics is constantly evaluated. Information garnered from post-lecture questionnaires has already been used by the LRC as a basis for preparing a new series of lectures, which will include environmental issues, crisis situations in domestic settings, classes on primary pre-medical care, a psychological workshop, and a review of medicine-related records from the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

Children as Active Participants

Understanding the need to engage the most active pupils as peer educators was a watershed of the program. Young people tend to feel more open and at-ease when discussing “sensitive” topics with their contemporaries rather than authority figures such as teachers or physicians, and the student-lecturers are able to create an atmosphere of trust. Each student-lecturer chooses the topic for each new class her/himself and then uses resources and assistance provided by the LRC to collect information and teaching materials. Through this experience the student-lectures, gain the confidence that comes with responsibility and knowing that others trust you to perform an important task well.

Additionally, making school children active participants in the program has resulted in a partnership with the Kurgan-based Garmoniya Center, which—among other things—specializes in post-school education of young adults. In collaboration with the Garmoniya Center, the LRC has developed a year-long program that allows teens who have chosen medicine as their future profession to obtain practical training at local and regional healthcare institutions.

Teachers from the medical and technical staff of the Kurgan Maternity Hospital

hold classes with several groups of these students on a weekly basis using various didactic methodologies such as lectures, discussion sessions, videos, excursions, and practical training. Whenever possible, the teens are given the opportunity to perform actual tasks and have had hands-on experiences in topics ranging from the use of information technology in medicine to hematology. While all of these sessions are professionally oriented, they are adjusted to meet the needs and perceptions of their younger audience. Additionally, senior medical trainees carry out scientific research in conjunction with their instructors at the Maternity Hospital and actively use the resources provided by the LRC. Topics for such studies include the causes of hemolytic disease in neonates and the geographical and environmental aspects of the development of inborn diseases.

One event that grew out of this program is “Creative Week.” During this week, the members of the training program gained insight into the day-to-day operations of the Maternity Hospital by shadowing their instructors in the laboratory, diagnostic and therapy rooms, and various other departments throughout the facility. Parents—along with teachers and pupils from similar medical training programs across the region—also participated in some of the lectures and classes. The week culminated with a scientific and practical conference where the most successful students made a number of presentations.

Another example of the type of experiences open to these young people is more poignant. One group of students observed the birth of a child to a drug-addicted woman. The infant looked healthy at first glance, but the students soon learned that he also suffered from his mother’s addiction. The next day, the mother ran away and the child died from complications. Each and every student was deeply moved by this real-life drama, and during the discussion of the

tragic event the pupils stressed the importance of adopting a healthy lifestyle, taking responsibility for one’s actions, learning the value of safe sex and family planning, and understanding that all children deserve parents who want and love them.

Toward the end of their training, students describe their impressions of the program and the impact it has had on their lives. Calling the atmosphere at the Maternity Hospital “so bright that I was full of hope that life will never cease,” a girl in the tenth grade says that a career in obstetrics now “attracts her like a magnet” and a ninth-grader says she, “was deeply impressed by a video from an American clinic.” After observing a surgical operation, she felt great interest, fear, and agitation, but when the surgeon’s strong hands extracted a child, who then began to cry, she was happy and delighted. Another ninth-grade girl notes that her practical training at the hospital has changed her entire life. “I can honestly say that this year was not enough for me. People learn lessons throughout their life and there is no point in standing still. I was deeply drawn into a world in which people need to develop and improve themselves.”

The students are not the only ones who support the program. Professor Antonina Volkova, honorary physician of Russia, says she believes the practical training courses at the Maternity Hospital are a unique way of reaching children at an early age, when it is possible to make a real difference in their lives.

The medical training group program is constantly expanding as staff at the Maternity Hospital obtain new materials and resources. Currently, the clinicians are exploring the opportunities for making the LRC a more mobile establishment by equipping it with vehicles and portable presentation devices—all with a view toward improving the efficiency of learning and being able to hold training classes in field locations throughout the city and beyond. ■