

Discarding the “Doctors’ Secret:” Surgeon Forms Partnership With Patients

“There used to be a course under the old Soviet system called ‘The Doctors’ Secret.’ They taught us that we shouldn’t tell patients about their diseases or conditions because it would only cause them to become overly fearful or phobic about doctors and hospitals,” says Dr. Igor Kovalchuk, deputy head physician of Kiev City Clinical Hospital #3 and a surgeon and mammologist at the Kiev WWC.



PHOTO: ANATOLY FEDORSTIV

Dr. Igor Kovalchuk discusses treatment options with a patient at the Kiev WWC.

“In 1991, I visited the Netherlands and, for the first time, I began to change my views about the way I practice medicine, but it was my first AIHA partnership exchange in Philadelphia that radically changed my mind about how the relationship between doctors and patients should be,” Kovalchuk asserts. During that visit, Kovalchuk joined doctors at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania as they made their rounds, assisted in a number of surgical procedures, and met with patients before and after their operations.

“What intrigued me the most was that the physicians were actually telling the patients exactly what kinds of medical problems they had. If a doctor suspected cancer, he told the patient,” Kovalchuk says. “In Kiev, our doctors do not discuss med-

ical conditions with patients in any great detail because they believe people do not know much about such things.” Watching the medical staff in Philadelphia explain both the diagnosis and options for treatment so each patient could get a clear understanding of his or her particular situation and, consequently, take a more active role in choosing an appropriate course of action, Kovalchuk began to think differently about the way he himself interacted with patients.

When he returned to Kiev, Kovalchuk immediately began to tell his patients as much as possible about their conditions, potential treatments, and likely outcomes. “I discovered that my patients were really interested in discussing their conditions with me and, because I was open with them, they felt that I really cared about them as individuals and became more open and trusting in return.”

Working with patients to make them feel comfortable and included in the treatment process soon became one of the main goals of staff at the Kiev WWC—although it is not always an easy task, according to Kovalchuk. “First of all, there is a certain mistrust and fear that most people have of doctors. It is a natural sort of phobia, I suppose, because no one wants to hear bad news. Normal time constraints also pose a problem. It is sometimes difficult for a surgeon to find enough time to explain all the details to every patient.” That’s why other staff and even other patients play such an important role for women who have been diagnosed with cancer, Kovalchuk notes. “Very often, our patients trust and find comfort in people who have gone through similar experiences more than the doctors. I don’t want to minimize the important role of doctors, but for information and emotional support, other people can be equally, if not more, important.”

At the WWC, clinicians actively engage in patient education and outreach programs to increase a woman’s understanding of the importance of being an active participant in her own health. “Many of our patients are becoming more and more aware of both the things they can do to live healthier lives and

As part of AIHA’s Breast Health Program, which operates at three Women’s Wellness Centers (WWCs) throughout Ukraine, healthcare providers seek to empower women to be more proactive participants in their own health and well-being.

Through patient education—especially the need for monthly self-examinations—as well as diagnostic screening, clinical breast examinations, psychosocial counseling, group therapy, and a number of related services, clinicians and patients build a relationship based on open communication, support, and respect. More than 30 healthcare practitioners have been trained through AIHA’s Breast Health Program since its inception in 1997. Below, one surgeon describes how AIHA’s partnership program changed the way he interacts with his patients, such as Yulia (see other side), at the Kiev WWC.

the types of services that are available,” Kovalchuk says, noting that increased media coverage of health issues also plays a role in educating the public. “It is much easier for me, as a surgeon, to communicate effectively with patients and make them feel like part of a team to improve their health if they are well-informed.”

Noting that he often encourages his patients to arm themselves with as much information as possible and even to seek the opinions of other physicians, Kovalchuk explains, “I try to pay more attention to those patients who are unsure about what treatment is best for them. . . . I want them to be well-informed—even if I have to tell them things they would rather not hear—because, in the end, the bitter truth is better than a sweet lie.”

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