

A Mother's Concern for Her Son's Health Benefits an Entire Community

When her 2-year-old son Anton was first diagnosed with diabetes mellitus, Irina knew nothing about the disease or how to treat it. What she did know was that she had no intention of letting her firstborn suffer through multiple hospitalizations or miss out on anything life had to offer. After struggling to manage Anton's diabetes for more than 10 years, Irina—along with a group of parents of



Irina (left) discusses education and outreach programs with Olga Vetokhina, manager of the Dubna Diabetes Education Center.

children with diseases and handicaps ranging from diabetes to cerebral palsy—decided to take matters into her own hands. According to Irina, the group arranged to meet with a specialist from Moscow—Dr. Elvira Kasatkina, Russia's chief pediatric endocrinologist—who later became a mentor to them as they looked for ways to help their children. From this relationship, a group of diabetics and their families formed a casual alliance that met periodically to discuss their experiences and various ways of dealing with the disease, as well as to offer each other advice and support. And so, as Irina explains, the students of the Dubna Diabetes Education Center were in place before the school itself.

"When the Education Center was formed in 1993 through AIHA's Dubna/La Crosse health partnership, our biggest concern was the lack of high-quality insulin," Irina states, noting that frequent hospitalizations were common among Dubna's diabetic population at that time. "But the Americans who worked with us helped

change the mentality about how diabetes is treated—not just for patients and their families, but for doctors as well. We learned that the disease can be controlled by life-style choices such as diet and regularly monitoring blood glucose levels. . . . This information helped us take responsibility for our own health and the health of our children." As their knowledge grew, fewer diabetes-related complications occurred and the children were able to enjoy a more settled existence. "Before this Center was formed, Anton really was not able to live a normal life—to play sports or dance like other kids."

Today, however, after eight years of successfully dealing with his disease, Anton is an active 22-year-old systems analysis and management student at Dubna International University. As Anton explains, "It's no coincidence that I am healthy and physically independent—I learned how to take control of my disease at the Diabetes Education Center," where he and his classmates were taught how to monitor their blood glucose levels and adjust their diet and insulin injections accordingly. "I am much more



Anton, now a 22-year-old university student, enjoys a holiday with his cousin, Maria, and sister, Varvara.

confident in my ability to judge the best way to regulate my blood sugar level and now enjoy a great deal of freedom and independence."

Noting that his life would likely have been a series of long hospital stays, doctor's appointments, and diabetes-related health complications, had the Center not provided him with accurate information, Anton now works part-time as a Web master and enjoys computers, swimming, volleyball, and learning English, in addition to his classes at the university. "None of this would have been possible for me if I hadn't received

The diabetes management program created, developed, and implemented through the efforts of AIHA's Dubna/La Crosse partnership is a fully replicable model that uses a multidisciplinary, wellness-oriented team approach to educate patients in self-management of their disease. It is modeled after a community-based program used by healthcare providers in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and was adapted to meet the needs of the population of Dubna, Russia. Since the program's inception in 1993, more than 2,520 diabetics, 1,130 family members, and 343 medical practitioners have been trained at the Dubna Diabetes Education Center. Insulin use has declined by 30 percent and average length of hospital stays associated with diabetes-related complications has been cut in half, leading to a consequent decrease in healthcare spending and—more importantly—immeasurable improvements in the quality of life for the region's diabetic population. Here is the story of how the Dubna Diabetes Education Center changed the life of one mother and her diabetic son. The Center's director's story appears on the other side.*

such psychological support and learned how to handle my condition."

Especially for young patients, peer support is just as important as receiving accurate information about diabetes and how it can be controlled, Irina admits. "In the early days, it was difficult for our children to adapt to the changes in diet and lifestyle, but now it only takes two or three weeks for them to adjust. Anton and I constantly recommend the Center to people who have just been diagnosed with diabetes. . . . Those children who fall ill with diabetes in Dubna are lucky because we become an extended family for them. In Moscow, most sick children don't have this kind of support."

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