

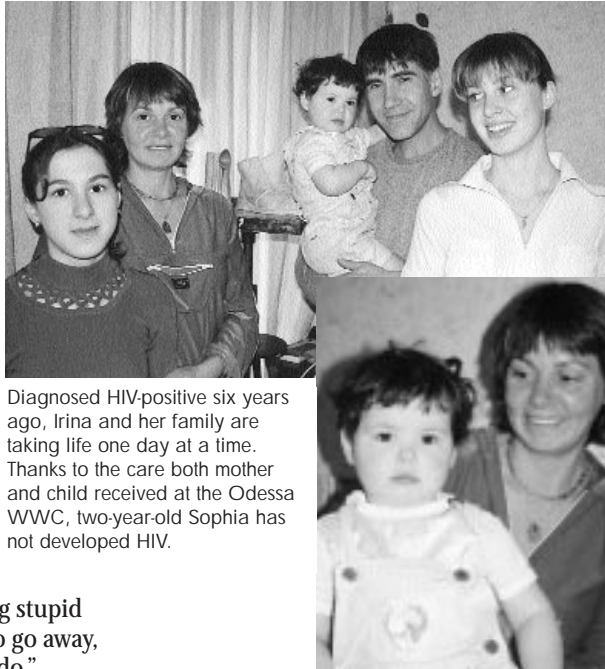
Compassionate Care Gives Hope to HIV-positive Woman

“When I was diagnosed HIV-positive in 1996, it was a complete nightmare,” 34-year-old Irina Dmitrieva says, quietly shaking her head as she thinks back on that day. “I had quit using drugs more than three years before and I just went to the polyclinic because I had been having trouble with a chronic sore throat and laryngitis. I never expected to find out that I had HIV.” Worse still, she never expected to be treated with such cruelty and disdain. “The doctor acted more like a KGB agent than a physician, swearing at me, calling me names, and blaming me for being stupid enough to get sick. He told me to go away, that there was nothing he could do.”

As a young girl growing up in Odessa, Irina says she never thought her life would turn out this way. “But no child ever thinks she will become an addict when she starts drinking or taking drugs with her friends, right?” When she was only 12, Irina fell in with a group of older teens who used her kitchen to process opium poppies into an injectable liquid. “They gave me this drug for free. I guess you could say it was my reward for letting them use my house,” she says with no small amount of irony. By the time she turned 14, she was an addict.

“I tried to quit for the first time then. My parents took me to a mental hospital—that was the way they handled addiction at the time—where I stayed for two months, but as soon as I came home I started shooting opium again. It was so easy to get drugs and so easy to fall right back into my old patterns,” Irina says. Those patterns included periods of heavy substance abuse interspersed with unsuccessful attempts to turn her life around. In 1985, she gave birth to a daughter, Lisa; five years later she had Katya. All the while, she continued to use drugs.

“Finally, I had enough—enough of suffering, enough of living my life only to get more and more and more drugs, enough of



Diagnosed HIV-positive six years ago, Irina and her family are taking life one day at a time. Thanks to the care both mother and child received at the Odessa WWC, two-year-old Sophia has not developed HIV.

PHOTOS: SUZANNE E. GRINMAN

having no money and no possessions, enough of living in this insane world I had created for myself,” Irina says, explaining that she went to Moscow in 1992 to participate in a 12-step program. When she came back to Odessa, she was drug-free. Soon after, she started working as a counselor at “Staircase,” a similar substance abuse treatment center in Odessa.

Just as things seemed to be looking up, Irina discovered that she was HIV-positive. The pain and shock she felt when she heard the news crushed her resolve and sent her spiraling back into the world of drug abuse and other high-risk behavior that resulted in another pregnancy four years later. “When I became pregnant, every doctor I went to said that it wasn’t possible for me to have the baby, that she wouldn’t be healthy. No one wanted to deal with me; they kept shuffling me from one place to another,” she explains, her eyes starting to fill with tears as she describes the despair she felt at that point in her life. “I felt so alone—as if the whole world had turned against me.”

Three weeks before her due date, a gynecologist told Irina that she would need to have a Caesarean delivery because of a

The NIS and CEE are currently experiencing the fastest increase of HIV infections in the world, with more than one million cases reported to date. At the Women’s Wellness Center (WWC) in Odessa, Ukraine—a port city with one of the highest HIV infection rates in the country—staff provide compassionate, non-judgmental care for HIV-positive women. This is the story of one such woman, a former intravenous drug user, who gave birth to a healthy baby girl thanks to the care she received; the story of the physician who continues to treat her appears on the other side.

problem with her cervix. The doctor recommended that she go to the Odessa WWC and ask for Svetlana Posokhova, the Center’s director. “I thought ‘great, more of the same getting shuffled from one indifferent doctor to another,’ but Svetlana was absolutely different,” Irina says. “She immediately set up meetings with counselors and addiction specialists, placed me in the best ward in the hospital, and even bought some necessities for the baby with her own money.” But, even this kindness wasn’t enough to break the hold opium had on Irina. “Up until the last minute before I gave birth I was still using,” she confesses, admitting that she would sneak out of the hospital and walk a few blocks to an area called “The Palermo,” a notorious section of the city where people go to purchase drugs. She was high when she gave birth to her third daughter, Sophia.

Proclaiming that Svetlana was the first person to show her what her life could be like if she stopped using drugs and alcohol, Irina says, “She is like a second mother to me and she made me see that even though my HIV cannot be cured, I can live a good life.” Nearly two years later, Irina remains drug-free and Sophia is a healthy, happy toddler. “Today, all my energy is aimed at staying healthy and raising my three daughters right so they do not repeat my mistakes,” she concludes, noting that she tries not to dwell on the future. “It’s better to take life one day at a time.”

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Helping HIV-Positive Women Give Birth to Healthy Babies

Her patients adore her and it's not difficult to see why. Dr. Svetlana Posokhova's warm, self-assured demeanor and her top-notch skills as an obstetrician/gynecologist make them feel as if they have a second mother whenever they come to the Odessa WWC. And the women do come.

The Center in the busy Black Sea port city receives some 33,000 patient visits each year.

"The WWC here in Odessa is unique in that it takes not only patients from the city, but also referrals from other facilities throughout the Oblast," explains Posokhova, who has been the WWC's director since it opened in 1998. Noting that the Center offers a wide range of comprehensive health services for women, she points out that most of the patients are pregnant women

who live nearby, woman with high-risk pregnancies from the entire region, couples experiencing problems with infertility, and those seeking screening for breast cancer, among other things. It is also the place where pregnant women diagnosed with HIV are sent for care.

"Odessa is a crossroads where there is a good deal of drug trafficking and prostitution. Not only do we have heroin and cocaine coming into our ports, we also have people living here who produce an opium-based product that is even more dangerous because it is cheap and readily available," Posokhova says, noting that the number of HIV-positive people in the city started to grow dramatically in 1995. "For pregnant women here, the problem of mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) of the disease is very serious. In the United States, MTCT

rates hover around one percent while, in Ukraine, they can reach as high as 30 percent. Healthcare workers are also at high risk for infection if they don't know how to protect themselves when they treat HIV-positive patients."

Explaining that surveys conducted in the early stages of the partnership with Coney Island Hospital indicated that 41 percent of the maternity unit's staff came in contact patient blood during vaginal births and 30 percent did so during Caesarean deliveries, she says, "We implemented some general infection control protocols that included mandatory use of universal precautions and various employee training seminars, and this helped lay the foundation for the Hospital's—and the WWC's—work with HIV-positive patients."

Noting that the Hospital is also the site of an AIHA-sponsored pilot MTCT prevention program conducted with Colorado's Boulder Community Hospital, Posokhova explains, "Approximately five percent of all deliveries at the maternity ward are to HIV-positive women and physicians at the WWC treat some 100 women with the disease on an ongoing basis. Although there is a special HIV/AIDS Center in Odessa, these women choose to come here because they have developed a bond of trust with our staff," she says, describing Irina, one of her own patients with whom she has just such a relationship.

"The first time I met Irina was when she was admitted to the maternity ward three weeks before her due date. She was referred to me by a physician at another facility and she was in terrible shape," Posokhova

As HIV infection rates in the NIS and CEE multiply at an alarming rate, AIHA partnership Primary Care Clinics and Women's Wellness Centers (WWCs) are focusing on educating their communities about the deadly disease and how it can be prevented. Ukraine's Odessa Oblast Hospital—member institution of the now-graduated Odessa/Coney Island partnership and site of the Odessa WWC—has been working with HIV-positive patients since 1987. This is the story of a physician who cares for women who have been diagnosed with HIV; the story of one such woman appears on the other side.

recounts, noting that some 10 percent of their HIV-positive pregnant patients come to the Center for the first time when they are close to term. "She had obviously been a heavy drug user—the only vein we could find was in her groin—but even so, she was different from most women who came in to the Hospital in such a condition. Irina was the only one who ever admitted that she needed help to quit."

But, helping Irina was not an easy task. "We provided counseling and constant care for her up until the moment she delivered, trying to wean her off the drugs. Even so, she would sneak out of the hospital and walk to 'The Palermo,' a place where people go to buy drugs," Posokhova notes, saying that Irina was high when her daughter, Sophia, was born.

"We gave Nevirapine to Irina four hours before she delivered the baby and we gave Sophia two doses of the same drug within the first three days following her birth," Posokhova continues, smiling broadly when she points out that Sophia is now a very healthy, happy two-year-old and Irina has been drug-free since the delivery. "Any time we successfully prevent an infant from developing HIV, we are thrilled that we were able to help. Our ultimate goal is to ensure that these unfortunate women live on through their children—through their healthy, beautiful children."



PHOTO: SUZANNE E. GRINMAN

Svetlana Posokhova cuddles one of her tiny patients at the maternity ward of the Odessa Oblast Hospital.

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