

Tashkent Clinic Offers Hope to Women Battling Cervical Cancer

AIHA Women's Wellness Center Provides Compassionate, High Quality Care and Support in Uzbekistan Thanks to USAID-funded Partnership Program

When it comes to providing women's healthcare services, a patient's age is not at all important, according to Delfusa Kurnanbekova, an obstetrician and gynecologist at the Tashkent Women's Wellness Center in Uzbekistan. "After all, every one of our patients is someone's mother, someone's wife, or someone's daughter. No family can enjoy life to the fullest without the care and affection of these women," she points out.

The strength of Kurnanbekova's commitment to this notion is evident in the passion she has for the work she does each day at the Women's Wellness Center. Her many satisfied patients offer further testament to her professional skill and compassion. During clinic hours, there is always a line of people waiting outside her office despite the fact that the services she provides are not free of charge. Not one to rush through a consultation, Kurnanbekova makes sure each woman gets the care and attention she needs.

"People need to be educated to ensure they stay as healthy as possible and that means I must take the time to chat with each one. For example, very few women know that cervical cancer—which is one of the leading causes of mortality among women in Uzbekistan—can be caused by sexually transmitted infections such as human papilloma virus," she remarks, noting that she makes use of a multitude of teaching aids and educational brochures when explaining this and other health issues to her patients. While this client-centered approach is relatively uncommon in much of the former Soviet Union, it is the hallmark of the Tashkent Women's Wellness Center.

Situated in the Uzbek capital, the center provides a broad range of clinical care and related services to women of all age groups

from adolescence through the reproductive years, menopause, and beyond. The facility was opened in 1997 through the efforts of a volunteer-driven partnership that linked the Second Tashkent State Medical Institute in Tashkent with the University of Illinois Medical Center in Chicago. Established by the American International Health Alliance (AIHA) with funding from the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Tashkent/Chicago partnership selected women's health as one of the key priorities for its collaboration. Since 1992, partners have emerged as pioneers in women's health by introducing a number of new programs and services, including Pap smears for the diagnosis of cervical cancer.

Because cervical cancer is so prevalent in Uzbekistan, combating the disease is critical Kurnanbekova says. "If diagnosed at its earliest stages, it is a completely curable disease unlike other cancers affecting the lung, stomach, or skin, for example. Unfortunately, many medical institutions here still use histological analysis to identify cervical cancer, which often produces inaccurate results. Thanks to our partnership, we were the first clinic in the country to introduce Pap tests. This method makes it possible to identify cancerous changes on a cellular level when the disease can still be successfully treated," she explains. This has resulted in considerably higher early detection rates than in other women's clinics. More importantly, it has translated into a greater number of women who have won their battle with cervical cancer and families who were spared the pain of losing them.

Zhamilya Sadykova is one of these women. Two years ago, the 49-year-old school teacher from Tashkent came to the Women's Wellness Center, where she was later diagnosed with cervical cancer.

Although the prospect of undergoing a hysterectomy was terrifying at first, Sadykova's fears were short-lived thanks to Kurnanbekova and the other clinicians and staff at the center.

"I was so lucky to find this center. This was the first time in my life that a doctor told me in detail about an illness, the operation itself, and its consequences," the mother of three explains. "Dr. Kurnanbekova presented all the information so logically and competently. She very easily convinced my husband and me that our personal life would not come to an end after the operation, which is a common belief here. After speaking with the physician he told me to proceed with the operation as soon as possible and that is what we did."

The operation, Sadykova says, was a complete success thanks to Kurnanbekova. "I was in her capable hands from beginning to end. When I awoke from the anesthetic, my whole family was sitting in the ward with me and so was Dr. Kurnanbekova. As



Dr. Delfusa Kurnanbekova counsels Zhamilya Sadykova, providing her with the information she needs to make healthier lifestyle choices.

AIHA Success Stories



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Ob/gyn Delfusa Kurnanbekova demonstrates how imaging equipment used at the Tashkent Women's Wellness Center assists with the diagnosis of cervical cancer.

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—Delfusa Kurnanbekova,
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soon as I looked into her eyes, I felt a sense of calm because I could tell everything went well. Two years have passed since then and all of my follow-up tests have been wonderful with no sign of cancer or other problems. Now my daughters, my niece, and my husband's sister are also her patients," she maintains, adding, "When my son gets married, I'll take his wife to see her as well!"

Kurnanbekova credits a good deal of her knowledge and skills to her involvement with the AIHA partnership. "The efficiency of a doctor's work depends on the schooling she receives. Our entire Women's Wellness Center team was very lucky for the opportunity to learn a completely different approach to women's healthcare thanks to our partners in Chicago. Through our collaboration, we implemented many innovative methods of diagnosing and treating diseases and learned how to interact more effectively with patients," she acknowledges. The partnership program also gave Kurnanbekova and her colleagues the tools and support they needed to extend the benefits of their work

"From the moment we opened our center in 1997, we began looking for ways to introduce Pap tests on a national level," Kurnanbekova says, admitting that it was a daunting task given the fact that there were no cytologists trained in the method in all of Tashkent who could provide a second-level review of their findings. "We had to search

for literature and find articles on the Internet—something our partners and various AIHA workshops and conferences contributed greatly to. Finally, we had enough resources to deliver a complete training package to the outside cytologists. When they had mastered the methodology, though, we realized we did not have a sufficient number of reagents for them. Right at that same time, funding for our partnership was coming to a close."

Help came in the form of a Peace Corps volunteer who worked at the center during 2000-2001. Nurse Emily Fedullo—who later joined AIHA as a Washington, DC-based program officer—helped clinic staff draft a winning proposal for a USAID grant to create a cytology laboratory at the center, which opened in 2002. Others helped pull things together, too, Kurnanbekova says. "Another Peace Corps volunteer helped us gather the results of 200 cytological analyses, which were then sent to the United States for an independent review. The results were not comforting. In one instance, we had overlooked a case of cancer. But we learned from our early mistakes and got further training and assistance from AIHA and Jan Reimers, a doctor at the Tashkent International Clinic, she notes with satisfaction.

As some of the country's leading specialists in the field of cervical cancer, staff at the Tashkent Women's Wellness Center are providing training on its screening and

treatment to practitioners throughout Uzbekistan thanks to support from the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA). This training is bolstered by a joint of UNFPA-Uzbek Ministry of Health program that in 2005 outfitted oncology centers in five major regions with diagnostic equipment and provided primary care institutions with Pap test kits. "Our dreams are coming true," Kurnanbekova says with a smile, stressing that the secret of their success can be summed up in two words: desire and persistence. "Of course, there is a lot of hard work behind all this, but the level of satisfaction from what has been achieved makes it all worthwhile," she asserts.

Zhamilya Sadykova couldn't agree more. "I am all for this intelligent, proactive brand of medicine. Having the right information along with the support of skilled, compassionate professionals makes it much easier for me and my family to stay healthy," she says, concluding, "I feel wonderful and I am happy that I can now live peacefully and help my children raise our grandchildren. Our family has always been a strong and friendly one. Now, it is also a healthy one."



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