HIV/AIDS explosion in Russia triggers research boom

Several studies now underway aim to offer solutions to the HIV/AIDS crisis for Russian policy makers

With a reddening sun sinking below the skyline on a warm spring evening in the ramshackle Moscow suburb of Mitishi, more than 60 women, some from nearby apartment towers, but most from rural Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova, line up in a parking lot beside an eastbound highway for a “pokaz”—Russian for “show”. Before a steady flow of men cruising by in their cars, the women, most wearing tight-fitting clothes and high heels, stood smoking, chatting, and smiling nervously in two lines, one for older women charging US$50 for sex, one for younger women charging $100. A few hundred metres down the road, another pokaz had also formed—just one more of Moscow’s innumerable prostitution bazaars.

For Dima Cheumarev and Nadia Romanova, two psychologists gathering health data on sex workers for the Moscow office of AIDS Foundation East West, a Netherlands-based non-governmental organisation (NGO), it all added up to plenty of women to talk to. “We come for clues about the role of the sex trade in spreading HIV in Moscow”, Romanova explained while scanning replies from 41 women who had agreed to answer rapid assessment questionnaires about their age, origin, access to medical care, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). “We give them free condoms and information about STIs”, Cheumarev said. “In return, they give us their medical secrets.”

With Russia’s HIV infection epidemic now thought to be exploding faster than anywhere else in the world—238 404 HIV cases are now officially registered, anywhere else in the world—238 404 HIV cases are now officially registered, although Russia’s top HIV officials say the real number should be doubled, maybe even quadrupled—the hunt for clues about the epidemic’s causes, and how to curb it, has become a major focus for a growing number of Russian medical researchers, often working with international collaborators.

“There’s been an explosion in HIV/AIDS research in Russia”, says Alexander Goliusov, who heads the Russia Ministry of Health’s HIV Prevention Unit. “In fact”, Goliusov warns, “with so much research underway, we worry researchers may soon be duplicating work that’s already been done here”. While a handful of researchers are pursuing specialised topics as diverse as computer modelling of the epidemic’s potential economic and social implications, to genetic typing of HIV variants, and HIV vaccine development and clinical trials for new drugs, the vast majority of researchers are concentrating on studies of HIV transmission pathways, HIV prevalence, and methods of HIV prevention.

“We need to know a lot more about how the epidemic is spreading, both so we can focus our AIDS prevention programmes, and so we can help convince the Russian government the problem is big, but controllable through prevention and harm reduction strategies”, explains Nelly Kamaletdinova, an epidemiologist with AIDS Foundation East West. Kamaletdinova currently has four studies underway using standardised, WHO-approved methods to track HIV risk-taking behaviour among 50 000 Russian sex workers, intravenous drug users, and prisoners.

Despite the dramatic growth in new research, information gaps on how HIV is spreading in Russia remain large, according to Françoise Hamers from the European Centre for the Epidemiological Monitoring of AIDS (Saint-Maurice, France). Hamers, who recently reviewed published and unpublished studies and reports to analyse HIV/AIDS surveillance data for Russia and 26 other former communist bloc nations (see Lancet 2003; 361: 1035–44), says the general population’s understanding of HIV transmission is poor and HIV prevention is rarely a priority: needle-sharing seems to be widespread, sexual promiscuity common, and use of condoms among sexually active adolescents in Russia low. In addition, several recent studies of Russian men who have sex with men indicate high levels of risk-taking and a high frequency of bisexuality, which has implications for rapid heterosexual HIV diffusion. “We need to know more on sexual networks, who has sex with who, and at what frequency”, Hamers says.

More than a dozen studies focusing on determining how HIV is spreading in Russia are now underway, thanks to major new support for Russian HIV/AIDS research from international sources including the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the National Institutes for Health (NIH). As part of what DFID officials in Moscow call a “programmatic approach” towards “encouraging the Russian government to act on HIV prevention”, DFID has committed £25 million...
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Female sex workers line up for a “pokaz” across a Moscow street

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