

Global Fund approves grants to fight HIV/AIDS in Russia

The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria has approved the first disbursements of a US\$88.7 million grant to five non-governmental organisations (NGOs) tackling HIV/AIDS in 10 of Russia's 89 regions. A further \$10.8 million for another consortium of NGOs and local health agencies tackling tuberculosis in Siberia's Tomsk region has also been approved. These are Russia's first approvals from the Global Fund, marking a "significant new commitment to Russia", says Urban Weber, the Fund's Russia director.

Tuberculosis kills about 30 000 people in Russia each year, and Russian HIV transmission rates are possibly the highest in the world, with as many as 1 million people now infected.

In Moscow, Rian van de Braak, director of AIDS Foundation East West (AFEW), one of the HIV/AIDS consortium members, says the money is intended to stimulate a national response to HIV/AIDS through programmes aimed at infection prevention,



Reuters

Prisoners in Siberia swallow their tuberculosis drugs

highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART), counselling, and policy development. AFEW will focus on mother-to-child HIV transmission, which increased five-fold last year.

In Tomsk, the money will support plans to tackle the high rates of tuberculosis and multidrug resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB), and rapidly rising rates of HIV, by

providing access to complete tuberculosis treatment for 16 000 prisoners including 950 MDR-TB patients.

Donna Barry, Russia director for Partners in Health, a member of the consortium that requested Global Fund assistance for tuberculosis in Tomsk, says "the funds will allow for increased enrolment of patients". She predicts

"improved treatment outcomes for those suffering with MDR-TB".

Vinay Saldanha, who coordinates Canadian-supported HIV/AIDS clinical trials with the Russian Federal AIDS Centre in Moscow, said the Fund's decision may be the biggest news to date for action on AIDS in Russia, whose annual federal AIDS budget is only \$4 million. But Saldanha cautioned that Russia's long-term insistence on acting "as a donor rather than a recipient to the Fund" has deterred the government from applying to the Fund. "Given the gravity of the Russian epidemic, the Russian government must act quickly in applying to the Global Fund, or risk missing the opportunity that the NGOs have capitalised on", Saldanha said.

At AFEW, Rian van de Braak acknowledged it was "unusual for a group of NGOs to apply to the Global Fund" without federal government support. "The Russian government has been slow" to apply for support, she explained, "so we decided to go ahead."

Paul Webster

Canada delays legislation on cheap drugs

Developing countries hoping to obtain cheap drugs from Canada to treat AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and other diseases will have to wait longer than expected for access to cheap drugs as internal politicking has indefinitely delayed passage of the necessary legislation.

Although the governing Liberal party tabled legislation on cheap drugs for poor countries on Nov 6—weeks later than promised—it promptly prorogued Parliament, dispatching the bill to death on the order paper, where it will have to be revived by the Prime Minister-in-waiting—Paul Martin—after he assumes office.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan twice contacted Canada over the past month asking the legislation to be expedited in the interest of saving lives. The government originally vowed the bill would be tabled in early October (see *Lancet* 2003; 362: 1290), but it quickly became embroiled in negotiations with brand-

name pharmaceutical firms and was all but paralysed by the ongoing leadership imbroglio that has engulfed the Liberals for over a year.

Even if the cheap drugs legislation is reintroduced immediately, federal officials say it is likely to be substantially revised because the brand-name pharmaceutical industry has been promised a chance to provide more input during public hearings to be undertaken by a House of Commons committee.

Among the unresolved issues is whether the new Martin government will allow cheap drugs to be made available for diseases other than AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, or succumb to pharmaceutical companies' demands that the diseases covered be severely limited. The new government must also decide whether to honour a Chretien promise to give the brand-name industry right of first refusal on filling cheap drug orders from poor nations.

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