

World Bank approves loan to help Russia tackle HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis

Russia's beleaguered health system received a boost on April 3 when the World Bank approved a long-delayed loan delivering US\$100 million for federal tuberculosis programmes, coupled with \$50 million for HIV/AIDS efforts. Russia first requested the loan in 1999, but wrangling over tuberculosis treatment strategies and sourcing for commercial tuberculosis drugs forced years of delay, even as the disease continued to kill 30 000 people per year, and HIV cases skyrocketed.

Describing Russia's HIV explosion amid the massive tuberculosis infection as "very, very dangerous", World Bank officials acknowledged the delay was "regrettable". Olusoji Adeyi, the Bank's lead health specialist for Europe and central Asia, said the loan will at last make it possible for Russia to "move fast and decisively" to fight the compound epidemics through better planning, bolstered treatment, and prevention campaigns.

For its part, the Russian government pledged to match the loan with \$134 million in new money over 5 years for tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. The government's contribution signals the Kremlin's growing recognition that the twin epidemics represent a looming catastrophe, which the World Bank predicts could drag Russia's economic output 10% below current levels by 2020. But HIV/AIDS officials in Moscow say the new federal money is too little, and too late, and that paying multimillion dollar World Bank borrowing fees and interest charges is inappropriate at a time when the Russian federal budget is in surplus.

"In the long run, borrowing from the World

Bank may prove far more expensive than simply using more of our own money", said Vadim Pokrovsky, head of the Russian Ministry of Health's Federal AIDS Centre. Pokrovsky says he welcomes the World Bank's efforts, however, because Russian AIDS officials remain complacent about the HIV epidemic. Pokrovsky says the government's estimate of 300 000 HIV cases is wildly wrong, and that infection has multiplied sixfold in 2 years.

"We believe a million Russians are now infected with HIV", he says. "That means tens of thousands will be dying from AIDS here within 5 years. My worry is that the problem will only be taken really seriously once people are dying in the streets. If we wait until then to act decisively, there will be millions of deaths we could have prevented by acting earlier."

HIV rates are exploding in Russia a decade after the collapse of the Soviet health system triggered a similar explosion of tuberculosis. Although the number of new tuberculosis cases has stabilised since 2000 at 92 cases per 100 000, this figure puts Russia 181st among nations for tuberculosis control. And cases of multidrug resistant tuberculosis continue to increase rapidly, especially in Russia's overcrowded prisons, where tuberculosis and HIV infection rates are up to ten times higher than elsewhere.

The World Bank wants Russia to target tuberculosis in prisons, and insists its loan be closely tied to a control strategy based on recent outcomes from 19 pilot projects validating WHO's recommended antibiotic treatment method—directly observed

treatment short course (DOTS).

While the course seems clear for Russian tuberculosis control based on a national DOTS strategy, continuing delays tackling HIV/AIDS have already had pernicious clinical consequences for Russia's 600 registered AIDS patients. "Although the AIDS era in our country has now started", says Alexander Pivnik, a haematologist specialising in AIDS diagnosis at Moscow City Hospital Number 60, "a mentality of fear persists. Doctors and nurses see AIDS-infected patients as grave risks. It's often difficult even to get simple biopsies done for my AIDS patients."

Because Russia currently budgets only \$6 million for HIV/AIDS control, with only modest new money expected in the years ahead, experts on international HIV/AIDS assistance to Russia have questioned the World Bank's decision not to quickly release the HIV/AIDS funds from the tuberculosis loan after disputes over the tuberculosis component emerged in 1999.

"The years of negotiation related to this loan have come at a time when the Russian HIV epidemic has been rapidly increasing. But the size of the loan has not increased in proportion to the growth of the epidemic", says Vinay Saldanha, director of a Canadian-funded effort to bolster AIDS control planning among Russian health officials. "The scope of this loan does not begin to address the clinical needs of Russia's growing HIV/AIDS epidemic now." Despite the delay, the World Bank says its effort could still save over 150 000 lives.

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World Bank cash is a welcome boost for tuberculosis patients