

ICPS newsletter[®]

Obstacles to the treatment of drug addiction are pushing the spread of HIV/AIDS in Ukraine

At public hearings on drug addiction and the spread of HIV/AIDS held in 11 Ukrainian cities, participants said that a conservative and ineffective government anti-drug policy was the key factor behind the fact that HIV/AIDS continues to spread at a dangerous pace. Other issues included the lack of a system for monitoring government programs that makes it impossible to assess their impact, the lack of funding, and poor coordination among government agencies responsible for dealing with this problem. In April, the second series of public hearings will look at specific measures to overcome these problems

The "Policy Campaign for Harm Reduction" project, implemented by the Ukrainian Harm Reduction Association (UHRA) and the International Centre for Policy Studies (ICPS) with funding from the International Renaissance Foundation and the International Harm Reduction Program of the Open Society Institute (New York), held a series of public hearings on harm reduction policy in Poltava, Luhansk, Znamianka, Dnipropetrovsk, Mykolayiv, Odesa, Simferopol, Chernivtsi, Uzhhorod, L'viv, and Kyiv.

The debates brought together staff from national and local government agencies involved in HIV/AIDS prevention, drug addiction and combating drug-related crimes, doctors, teachers, social workers, NGOs, current and former drug addicts, and the media. In total, more than 200 participants representing different stakeholders expressed their opinions on government policy in this area.

Their conclusions were that:

- Ukraine does not have an accountability mechanism for implementing national programs in HIV/AIDS and drug abuse prevention. A number of mechanisms for interagency coordination do exist but are, in fact, not working, so there is no real coordination.
- The current approach to policy development and implementation is more agency-than program-oriented, which can be seen in the lack of consolidated Government responsibility for implementing national programs.

This makes it impossible to achieve the desired results.

- Because the decision-making process is covert and opaque, current law enforcement policy is one-sidedly oriented on public safety issues without considering aspects of drug addiction related to healthcare and human rights.

Treatment of drug addicts was stopped for lack of funding

At the moment, Ukraine effectively has no system for treating drug addiction. Because the sector is underfinanced, drug treatment centers are not working to rehabilitate addicts. For the money they are allocated, such centers limit their activity to reducing withdrawal symptoms among drug addicts—in other words, detox work. After such treatment, however, as many as 99% of addicts return to drug abuse. Neither state drug treatment centers, nor any other government facilities are working on rehabilitation, that is, on treating drug addiction and returning addicts to a normal life.

As a result, the number of drug users is growing steadily. As of 2003, police agencies registered some 120,000 drug addicts, four times more than in 1991. According to other expert assessments, there are currently at least 400,000 drug addicts in Ukraine. Private rehabilitation centers cannot cover current needs for such services because government funding is both insignificant and unsystematic. This means that for many addicts willing

to change, rehabilitation services are inaccessible in terms of price and location, or not of the necessary quality.

Preventive activities cover only 10% of the need

Preventive measures such as blocking the transmission of HIV and other infectious diseases through shared use of syringes among injecting drug users (IDUs) are insufficient and ineffective. Ukraine has a number of needle exchange programs and programs providing advice and information about the risk of infection for IDUs through the network of Dovira points under the state system of Family, Children and Youth Services Centers. However, since 2000 only 52 centers have been set up across Ukraine to cover some 27,000 IDUs. To cover around 60% of such users, which is the minimum level needed to make a dent in the situation, the reach of Dovira services needs to grow at least tenfold.

Participants noted that the underfunding of preventive measures is one of the key reasons behind their poor effectiveness. The inadequate reach of preventive measures means that the number of those infected by HIV through injecting drugs is growing steadily.

Replacement therapy isn't being used

According to participants, another problem is the lack of replacement therapy for drug addicts. This kind of practice has been introduced in many countries and has made it possible to resolve a number of drug-related problems. In particular, users no longer need to find money and buy illegal drugs on a daily basis. Because replacement medications are provided in the form of pills or syrups, the risk of transmitting infectious diseases is also removed.

Although many participants said that replacement therapy was necessary, its introduction has been blocked by law

enforcement agencies for several years. The causes include a misunderstanding of methadone, which is used for replacement purposes, and a fear of possible corruption and abuse. Meanwhile, doctors say they are prepared and willing to start replacement therapy. They also point out that medical facilities have extensive experience using narcotic substances for detoxifying drug addicts and have participated in pilot projects to replace illegal drugs with other narcotic substances.

Because the police are essentially deciding by what means and how doctors are supposed to treat drug addicts, for the last few years, the country has not been implementing those measures written into the national HIV-prevention program, which includes replacement therapy. In addition, thousands of drug addicts continue to spend substantial amounts of money on illegal drugs, subsidizing criminal business. As a result, the IDUs themselves become semi-criminals and, thus, lose their own rights. The most important thing is that Ukrainian society misses out on opportunities to improve the situation with the spread of HIV.

The police used outdated methods

Participants concluded that police activities to combat drug addiction are ineffective because they focus too much on consumers, on those suffering from drug addiction. The vast majority of criminal cases to fight drugs involve making drug addicts criminally liable for possessing or producing drugs for personal consumption. This kind of policy does little to treat drug addiction and only makes addicts fearful and distrustful of government institutions, marginalizes them further, and puts them beyond the reach of preventive efforts.

Law enforcement agencies have a different viewpoint: they consider the fight against drug users one of their priorities, as drug addicts are most likely to commit crimes. According to police officials, drug users are the main channel for dealing in drugs and spreading drug abuse, so they see a policy of prohibition and oversight of its enforcement as most appropriate in this area. But this approach fails to consider the medical aspects of the problem.

HIV prevention suffers from lack of interagency coordination

The lack of coordination among government agencies was separately

mentioned by participants as one of the key reasons for policy being less effective. In Ukraine, the current approach to developing and implementing government policy in healthcare—as well as in other spheres—is to divide the development and implementation of HIV prevention among IDUs and the prevention and treatment of drug addiction among different agencies and different levels of government. Funding, reporting and accountability are split up in the same manner. As a result, no one agency's efforts are enough to have a real impact on the situation.

The new Health Minister, Mykola Polishchuk, has already declared fighting the HIV/AIDS epidemic one of the Ministry's priorities. However, the Health Ministry will not be able to eliminate this problem alone. Government policy to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic and drug addiction needs to become an example of an effective targeted approach, efficient interagency coordination, and high-quality program monitoring.

The debate will continue in April

To combat the HIV epidemic and drug addiction in Ukraine, a meaningful and effective dialog is needed among stakeholders to find practical approaches. ICPS and UHRA invite representatives of all interest groups to discuss government policy on drug addiction and HIV/AIDS prevention. In April, the second series of public hearings will present recommendations for strengthening coordination among HIV prevention programs, introducing mechanisms for monitoring and accountability, and options for truly switching to a program-based approach to forming the State Budget in healthcare.

The views of ICPS and UHRA specialists on the spread of HIV/AIDS in Ukraine are presented in a Green Paper called "A New Harm Reduction Policy." This paper provides expert opinions on drawbacks in current IDU policy and policy-making options in this area (see *icps newsletter* #261 dated 24 January 2005). ■

For more information about the "Policy Campaign for Harm Reduction" project and intermediate research results, visit us online at: <http://www.icps.com.ua/eng/project.html?pid=18>. For additional information, contact Andriy Bega by telephone at (380-44) 236-4477 and via e-mail abega@icps.kiev.ua.

In the latest issue of Political Commentary...

Viktor Yanukovich failed to win the legal war which many thought would postpone the inauguration of President Viktor Yushchenko. The victor of the repeat run-off vote also won the suit in the Supreme Court, took his oath of office, and quickly and radically replaced all the country's top officials. The new Government headed by Yulia Tymoshenko includes only people who participated in the Yushchenko campaign from Nasha Ukraina, the Bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko, the Socialist Party, and the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. Although all the political forces that were in Leonid Kuchma's coalition have been left without any high posts, most appear ready to support the new president's initiatives in the Verkhovna Rada. Still, this new coalition is fragile: it is not held together by the Government and is likely to function only if President Yushchenko is immediately successful.

The first meeting between President Yushchenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin made clear that the interests of the two leaders are completely opposed. Mr. Yushchenko's intentions to build equal relations and move towards the West conflict with Russia's traditional desire to be surrounded by vassals. At the moment, the Kremlin is waiting to see how actively Viktor Yushchenko will work to make Ukraine independent of Moscow. By contrast, the US immediately invited President Yushchenko to meet President George Bush, which was an unreachable dream for the discredited Leonid Kuchma. Renewed contacts at the highest level should open doors to resolving the key issues in Ukrainian-American relations, in particular US approval for Ukraine's accession to the WTO.

Ukraine's 2005 State Budget, adopted in late 2004, has a larger deficit since the Verkhovna Rada raised the minimum subsistence level. A balanced Budget will be the Tymoshenko Government's main challenge and it dealing with it by borrowing on the domestic market. After the disturbances of the political crisis in late 2004, the economy has fully stabilized and continues to grow at a brisk pace. Real GDP grew 12% in 2004.

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