

## AIDS in Russia—glasnost arrives at last

This week, Moscow played host to the first ever regional conference on HIV/AIDS to be held in Eastern Europe. The event marks a turning point in a country that has been reluctant to admit the disease is a problem. **Zosia Kmietowicz** looks at efforts to prevent a pandemic

In less than a year, the problem of HIV/AIDS in Russia has gone from near obscurity to the top of the political agenda. This is because the infection has spread from a group dominated by injecting drugs users into the general population, and the government fears a pandemic and economic collapse if minimal action continues.

Russia has 342 000 officially registered cases of HIV/AIDS out of a population of 145 million. But experts believe the true number infected is probably closer to one million.

Dr Luba Potemina, head physician at the AIDS centre in the southern city of Saratov, said, "Before 2001 most people with HIV [that we were seeing] were young men, which was very similar to the rest of Russia, where 98% of infections were among this group. Since injecting drug users are often characterised by a low level of responsibility this is where we started to see women become infected. Currently, sexual transmission accounts for 63% of all new cases."

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia peaked in 2001, with 88 000 new diagnoses nationally, which probably reflects increased awareness of HIV and more widespread testing facilities. Last year the number of new diagnoses fell to 35 000. But if the disease takes hold in the general population the number of cases could escalate rapidly.

Jon Lidén, a spokesman for the Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, said, "UNAIDS figures show that there were 250 000 new cases of HIV infection in Russia, Eastern Europe, and central Asia last year and that this is currently the worst growing epidemic in the world and one of the most volatile and vulnerable areas for a really big pandemic. Significant investment in fighting the

disease is really crucial."

The government is showing signs that it is taking the situation seriously. Last month, President Vladimir Putin allocated \$109m (£58m; €85m) in a national health project to pre-



Russian prisons house a tenth of the country's HIV population

vent, diagnose, and treat HIV and viral hepatitis. At the G8 summit in St Petersburg in July, a meeting of the eight most industrialised nations, the Russian government plans to focus on global pandemics, including HIV/AIDS. And the fact that Moscow hosted the first regional conference on HIV/AIDS in Eastern Europe this week signals that Russia is more open than ever before about its own situation.

But to succeed in averting a HIV pandemic there are other hurdles to overcome. There's an old Russian proverb that says that nobody is irreplaceable, says Ludmila Borisenko, president of a youth centre called Megapolis in Saratov. The saying has bred a society that is often reluctant to take responsibility for its health.

Ms Borisenko helped set up the centre in response to parents' pleas for a distraction for

their children who had little to keep them from drifting into drugs. She is determined to instil a sense of self preservation in every young person who walks through the door. Among her objectives is to arm the centre's users with the information they need to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS, but such projects, which run social events and put on shows, are rare.

About a third of the 18 to 25 year olds who use the centre are or were drug users. Anna, who's 20, says ignorance about HIV is widespread. She admits to thinking someone with HIV was dangerous before she learnt more about how the virus spreads. And although some young people would contemplate abstaining from sex to prevent

ents don't. He says many men keep their sexuality a secret.

To prevent a pandemic in the region, a strategy must embrace treatment for people who have HIV, as well as education, says Mr Lidén. But federal funds have been scarce and sufficient only for establishing diagnostic services and providing anti-retroviral therapy for pregnant women who are HIV positive.

The Global Fund, whose role is to attract and distribute financial aid to health and development organisations, has committed \$222 million to fight HIV/AIDS in Russia through three grants. One grant of \$121 million has gone to the Russian Health Care Foundation specifically to kick start access to anti-retroviral therapy.

The people of Saratov are lucky. Out of Russia's 89 regions, or oblasts, Saratov is one of nine to have successfully bid for a grant from this pool. With a population of 2.6 million and 7500 people registered with HIV/AIDS, Saratov has the 14th highest incidence of HIV/AIDS in Russia. It will receive \$832 000 to treat 1000 people in the region who qualify for antiretrovirals during the coming year. The deal stipulates that 40% of the grant must be used to treat HIV positive prisoners in the region.

Nikolai, aged 26 years, was diagnosed with HIV infection in 2000. He is one of 206 inmates with HIV in the Federal State Correctional Colony Number 2, in Saratov. He chose to live exclusively with inmates who are HIV positive, like 70% of those with HIV in the prison, because "everybody is like me and I don't have to explain what is happening."

Nikolai hesitates when asked how he became infected. But then says it was through using drugs. All HIV positive men at the prison receive extra meals and vitamin supplements. Nikolai's CD4 count is not yet low enough to warrant treatment with antiretroviral therapy. But he is worried about the future. His sentence for burglary with assault is not due to end until 2016, but leaving prison concerns him. "Everybody knows that it [HIV] cannot be cured," he said. "But what is possible [treatment with antiretroviral drugs] becomes quite problematic outside [the prison]." (See News Extra on [bmj.com](http://www.bmj.com).) □

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