

## Russia's health promotion efforts blossom

In a bid to reduce Russia's high rates of preventable disease, the government, with the help of non-governmental organisations, is bringing health promotion to the people. Tom Parfitt reports.

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Russia is seeing its first green shoots in the area of health promotion as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) lead the fight to erode the country's traditional emphasis on curative care.

A vigorous anti-alcohol campaign, new road safety measures, and a programme of health awareness workshops for teenagers are among the positive signs 6 months after the Kremlin introduced a new 12-year health-care blueprint which identified the "formation of health as a priority in the social and spiritual values of Russian society" as a key task.

Health and social welfare minister Tatyana Golikova announced the first sizeable state-funded project in line with that aim last month: the creation of a chain of 500 "prophylactic health advice rooms" in medical institutions as part of 830 million roubles (US\$26 million) to be spent on health promotion in 2009. She also gave details of a new campaign to improve school meals.

But health-care experts say there is a mountain to climb with immense opposition from powerful cigarette and vodka companies, open hostility among doctors to some WHO-

recommended disease prevention measures, and a structurally segregated system of care which hinders radical intersectoral efforts.

President Dmitry Medvedev pleaded advocates of change last month, however, when he chose health care as the topic for one of his series of "fireside chats" that have been running

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weekly on state television. Medvedev went out of his way to stress that "the overall state of our health can be attributed two-thirds to our lifestyle, that is to say, what we eat, what water we drink, what kind of lifestyle we lead in general, and only 10–15% to the medical care we receive".

Yelena Dmitriyeva, director of Healthy Russia Foundation, an NGO that is cooperating with the state to run workshops for teenagers called "Everything That Concerns You", believes only a transformation in thinking will bring success. She says the notion of health promotion is "totally unfamiliar" to most Russians, who are more used to terms such as "sanitary education" and "propaganda of a healthy lifestyle".

"The western tradition [of health care] is less biomedical, more human-centred, while the Russian tradition is more about curative medicine", says Dmitriyeva. "So you will treat very serious diseases but you think less about prevention and you will not motivate people to take care of their own health."

Surveys show Russians expect the state to have a deeply paternalistic role in looking after their health, and there is widespread suspicion of NGOs,

both among patients and health-care providers. But organisations like Healthy Russia Foundation are slowly making inroads with training sessions for health-care professionals on unfamiliar topics such as psychosocial support, rehabilitation for drug users and community mobilisation. "People in Russia are better educated, than, say, people in Africa, about HIV and drug use but we have a real problem with transforming knowledge and attitudes into changed behaviour", says programme director, Sergey Frolov.

Much of Russia's punishing mortality rate can be attributed to non-communicable diseases that could be eroded fast if personal habits were altered. A World Bank report published in 2005, found that cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and injuries account for 78% of deaths in Russia. High blood pressure, high cholesterol, and tobacco are the three leading risk factors. Alcohol—mostly consumed as spirits like vodka—kills an estimated 600 000 people per year.

Motivated by that last statistic, the Orthodox Church initiated an anti-alcohol campaign earlier this year with a high-profile series on state television. Presented by Father Tikhon, abbot of Sretensky monastery in Moscow, the programmes showed graphic images of damaged livers and brain cells decaying as a result of alcohol abuse. "We realised that it was very important for people to understand the process of degradation and destruction of a person, of society, caused by alcohol", Father Tikhon explained to the *Izvestiya* newspaper. "Most people acknowledge that alcohol causes harm, but not many can imagine the internal catastrophe that it wreaks on an individual level."

Anti-tobacco campaigners celebrated in June last year when Russia approved WHO's Framework



Getty Images

Consumption of alcoholic drinks causes around 600 000 deaths in Russia each year

Convention on Tobacco Control, although there were concerns in December when new control measures were watered down under heavy pressure from cigarette company lobbyists.

Aleksey Bobrik, deputy director of the Moscow-based Open Health Institute (OHI), says there have been other isolated successes in health promotion. One major sign was the recent ten-fold increase in fines for driving without a seatbelt, and the change in the law to make crossing into the oncoming lane an offence punishable by removing the driver's licence. "Taking such unpopular steps demonstrates serious intent on the part of the government", he says. More than 30 000 Russians have died annually in traffic accidents in recent years, almost double the average among other G8 countries.

Bobrik says NGOs such as OHI are beginning to overcome hostility from state bodies who not long ago were nonplussed at their desire to participate in health promotion and disease prevention. OHI and four partner organisations received \$89 million in 2003, the first large tranche of money for work in Russia from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. "We started in an environment of envy and hatred", he recalls. "I was invited to the ministry of health when we learned about the grant and people yelled at me, saying 'Who do you think you are? Do you think you will get this money?'" Now we are winning multi-million dollar tenders for projects from the same ministry."

Yet the progress is patchy. Professional associations of health-care providers are slow to get involved in social activism, and the rigidly compartmentalised structure of government means that education initiatives can fail because of poor coordination between the ministries of health, education, and sport.

Meanwhile, subjects such as sex, contraception, and drug use are

explosive and anyone broaching them with children can expect determined opposition. A conservative pressure group called the Parents' Committee recently branded sex education "a looming evil" and in 2006, NGOs supporting it were labelled paedophiles by an influential deputy in the Moscow city parliament. "There has been an increasing tendency to shy away from these issues", says Bobrik. "Condoms are a taboo subject in schools. It's so sensitive that even the attempts to introduce sex education which existed 3 or 4 years ago have basically stopped. Now the HIV prevention curriculum is about family values. There's no real teaching of practical information or skills."

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In fact, it is around HIV/AIDS prevention that experts paint the darkest picture. Joost van der Meer, executive director of AIDS Foundation East West, says Russia has "come a long way" since he first started working in the country a decade ago but budgets for tackling the epidemic remain small and are largely consumed by paying for expensive antiretroviral drugs. About 45 000 people are receiving antiretrovirals, 450 000 people are officially living with HIV, and there are 1.8 million injecting drug users (IDUs), with about 70% of new HIV/AIDS cases each year originating from drug use. Annual state spending on tackling HIV/AIDS is about 3 billion roubles (\$97 million) on treatment and only 400 million roubles (\$12 million) on prevention measures such as needle exchange. "Prevention spending needs to be at least brought in line with that on treatment", says van der Meer. "The government should look at the epidemiological reality and spend its money on those



An HIV/AIDS educator gives information and clean needles to an injecting drug user

groups that are at risk for HIV and then there would still really be a chance to stem the epidemic before it crosses into the general population and it's too late. At the moment it's failing massively. Even by the time the Global Fund finishes all its projects it estimates it may only reach 9% of Russia's IDUs. There needs to be a ramping up in harm reduction."

A key stumbling block is implacable opposition to methadone substitution therapy. Although WHO considers methadone "one of the most effective treatment options for opioid dependence" and a method for reducing heroin use, associated deaths and HIV risk behaviours, Russia's health establishment believes its use is unethical and wrong-headed because it replaces one addiction with another.

Dmitriyeva says she is hopeful for progress after the government's Healthcare Development Concept to 2020, published in December, pledged to create "a fashion for healthiness, especially among the teenage generation" as an urgent priority. "The road from the concept to real government orders is very long", she says. "But it's a great step forward that there is political commitment and health promotion has become a priority for the state. Leadership from the top is absolutely essential in Russia."

Tom Parfitt

For more on Russia's Healthcare Development Concept to 2020 see [World Report Lancet 2009](#); 373: 109-110