

Russia Experiencing Exponential Growth in HIV/AIDS Cases

The Russian Federation, along with the Baltic States and the Ukraine, are witnessing an epidemic forming right under their noses. The first official HIV case in the USSR was recorded in the end of 1986 from a Russian who contracted the virus in Africa. Up until the mid-1990's, most of the Russian Federation has been spared the worst of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. By 1996, the estimated number of people infected with HIV rose close to 10,000 cases. Today, it is estimated that between 1 million – 1.5 million people are living with HIV in Russia and approximately 80% of them are under the age of 30.

This epidemic is growing at a terrifying rate. At the beginning of the year 2000, 20 out of 100,000 Russians were infected with HIV, and by November 2003, the number skyrocketed to 180 per 100,000 Russians. Although, traditionally men carry most of the burden of HIV rates, at the end of 2002 women claimed 33%. This is a 35% jump from the previous year where women claimed only 24% of the HIV population. The rise in infections among women indicates that the virus is spreading into the general populations. While new infection rates are very high, awareness of HIV/AIDS and its deadliness remains very low. A study conducted by the BBC reports that roughly one half of Ukrainians and one third of Russians do not even know that HIV/AIDS is life-threatening.

In 1990, 90% of newly registered HIV cases occurred among drug users. Spreading of HIV among drug users is very high due to the fact that sharing unsanitary needles is one of the most effective ways to contract the virus. This HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia is can be linked to the growing population of drug addicts that has occurred in the past four years. Right now there are approximately 500,000 people registered at drug clinics and 4 million people overall who depend on drugs. This represents 3% of the total population and 30% of the drug users, use heroin. Most of these drug abusers that are being infected are under the age of thirty and highly sexually active. The combinations of millions of drug users with high infection rates who are sexually active, and low awareness of the nature of the disease, presents a great treat of rapid spreading among the general population in Russia.

Now, Russia is noticing that sexual transmission rates are greatly on the rise. In 2001, sexual transmission accounted for only 4.7%. Now, in 2003, the sexual transmission rates reached 17.5%. These figures are in uniform explaining part of the reason why women being infected with HIV is on the rise, as well as the number of children born with HIV. Although these numbers are staggering, the epidemic still is in its early stages and needs massive amounts of resources to combat this growing deadly problem. Currently though, the Federal HIV/AIDS program has been severely under funded with merely one million dollars allocated annually. Inadiquacies have been realized and now a \$286 million project has been launched targeted to prevention and control of the spreading of HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis, which also is a serious problem. Funding comes from the World Bank in the amount of a \$150 million loan, \$134 million from the Russian Federation, and \$2 million from the World Health Organization. The

problem has gone overlooked for some time, but hopefully now these efforts will control and stop this deadly epidemic that has plagued the Russian Federation.