

IAS Expresses Concern Over Future of HIV Prevention Efforts in Russia

8 October 2009 (Geneva, Switzerland) - The International AIDS Society (IAS) today expressed concern over reports that HIV prevention programmes aimed at individuals most vulnerable to HIV will not be supported in the Russian Government's new strategic health plan. Russia's discontinuation of these efforts could have disastrous consequences not only for Russia, but also for its neighbours.

"Civil society efforts to reach those most at risk for HIV infection face closure without the support of the Russian Government," said IAS President Dr. Julio Montaner. "This is of great concern to the international scientific community, which is looking to Russia's leadership to effectively combat HIV in the Eastern European and Central Asia region."

In recent years, Russia has expressed a growing role to lead the response to HIV/AIDS. In 2001, Russia signed the United Nations Declaration on AIDS, committing itself to providing universal access to HIV prevention, care and treatment. Russia reaffirmed its HIV commitment at the 2006 G8 Summit in St. Petersburg, and has expanded its HIV treatment access programme. However, according to UNAIDS, HIV prevalence in the Russian Federation, Eastern Europe and Central Asia has doubled since 2001, making the region home to the world's most rapidly expanding epidemic.

Data collected by Russian researchers show an HIV epidemic concentrated among people who inject drugs and their sexual partners; commercial sex workers and their clients; and men who have sex with men. Of the estimated one million people living with HIV/AIDS in Russia (of whom only around one-third are diagnosed), 80 percent are under the age of 30. "The data collected over the past few years by the Russian Government in HIV epidemiological surveillance clearly show where the epidemic is concentrated in Russia. This data is made useless if Russia does not use this research to prevent new HIV infections among the most affected populations," said Dr. Montaner. "History shows us that an uncontrolled, concentrated epidemic can emerge into a generalized epidemic."

The IAS hopes the upcoming Eastern Europe and Central Asia AIDS Conference (EECAAC) will be an opportunity for leading Russian health officials to re-evaluate their commitment to increasing investment in innovative approaches to HIV prevention, care and treatment among all Russians, including people who inject drugs, commercial sex workers, and men who have sex with men.

IAS Executive Director Robin Gorna is a Co-Chair of EECAAC, along with Gennadii Onishchenko, Head of the Federal Service on the Protection of Consumers Rights and Human Wellbeing, Michel Sidibe, Executive Director of UNAIDS, and Michel Kazatchkine, Executive Director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria.

EECAAC is expected to bring together several thousand HIV professionals from Eastern Europe and Central Asia under the conference theme, 'Regional Cooperation: Join the Efforts for Universal Access'. The conference will be held in Moscow from 28 to 30 October 2009. Gorna hopes to have a meeting to discuss the issue of HIV prevention with Russian Government leadership and her fellow EECAAC Co-Chairs during the conference.

“Thanks to the hard work over the past five years by organizations in Russia working on HIV prevention among its most vulnerable communities, there is now greater awareness and knowledge of how to prevent new infections and treat those who are infected,” said Gorna. “We hope to build collaboration with the Russian government, its scientific community, and civil society leaders to turn the tide of HIV in Russia and in neighbouring countries. We know around the world that programmes targeting the communities most affected by HIV are essential to curb the epidemic. Ensuring these programmes have adequate support and funding is critical to Russia, its neighbour countries, and the global community.”

The IAS is the world’s leading independent association of HIV professionals, with over 13,000 members in 188 countries working at all levels of the global response to AIDS. IAS members represent scientists, clinicians, public health, policy experts and community practitioners on the frontlines of the epidemic. The IAS is the lead organizer of the International AIDS Conference and the IAS Conference on HIV Pathogenesis, Treatment and Prevention.

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