

Social Changes: Lines of Inclusion and Diversity

International Conference on the Reduction of Drug-Related Harm,
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In March 2002, the 13th International Conference on Drug-Related Harm was held in the capital of one of our country's regions – Ljubljana, Slovenia. The choice of place was dictated by the realisation that Central and Eastern Europe are of great concern due to the increased danger of HIV transmission via unsafe injecting drug use (IDU). Thus, the development of co-ordinated and expanded prevention activities in our region is a top priority among local professionals and international organisations. At present, Slovenia is characterised by its balanced and pragmatic approach to drug-related problems, co-ordinated efforts between various services, and governmental support. All of

these factors, combined with relatively low HIV-prevalence, offer a good example to other countries in the region.

The International Harm Reduction Association (IHRA), together with the Sound of Reflection Foundation and other prominent governmental and non-governmental Slovenian organisations engaged in harm reduction activities, organised this conference. Moreover, many international organisations which play important roles in developing harm reduction strategies throughout the region, such as UNAIDS, WHO, AIDS Foundation East-West (AFEW), and others, assisted with conference preparation and were participants in the conference.

The 2002 conference was devoted specifically to the implementation of social changes and the solution to prob-

lems associated with drug use and health. During five days of interdisciplinary work, the following areas of concentration were the focus of presentations: practical activity, achievements in the field of drug policy, results of research, and evaluations in all areas associated with drug use, etc. Special attention was given to the introduction of elements of harm reduction programmes oriented towards addiction prevention and abstinence. Sessions were devoted to topics such as the following: drugs, war, and conflicts; drug policy reform; alcohol and harm reduction; the scope of HIV prevention programmes; the drug industry, migration and periods of transition; HIV and IDU in Russia and the CIS; 'club' drugs; drug use and sex work; modelling the effectiveness of interventions; and, overdoses, etc. Participants actively debated problems related to



*Participants
of the Session
'Harm Reduction
in Central and
Eastern Europe'.*

*Photo:
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interacting and exchanging experiences between countries of Eastern Europe and networks in other regions, where they play an important role in advocating harm reduction principles and have managed to obtain significant results in changing public attitudes towards drug-related problems. Furthermore, the participants discussed the development of the Central and Eastern European Harm Reduction Network (CEE-HRN, www.cee-hrn.org).

Various specialists working in the fields of public health, law, social welfare, and education attended the conference. Participants included experts, clinicians, researchers, politicians, members of drug users' organisations, international organisations, and local harm reduction projects, etc. While participants were from countries throughout the world, Central and Eastern European representation was particularly extensive.

Thanks to the support of IHRA and the Open Society Institute – Russia, a significant number of Russian specialists were able to participate in the conference. The Russian delegation included representatives of harm reduction projects, executive and legislative bodies, public organisations, and the Russian Orthodox Church. The conference afforded them with the opportunity to learn about the experiences and activities from their closest NIS neighbours, who have in many ways out-distanced Russia in the development of a legislative base for HIV prevention among drug users and in terms of practical work.

After the conference, we asked some participants to tell us their impressions and their thoughts regarding the further development of harm reduction activities in Russia.

Pat O'Hare, Executive Director, International Harm Reduction Association (IHRA):

– I was indeed impressed by the progress made by harm reduction programmes in Russia, CIS countries, and other regions of Eastern and Western Europe. I want to thank the donors, programme employees, drug users, as well as the politicians interested in this problem for these achievements. However, I realise the increasing need to establish mechanisms which protect the interests of harm reduction programmes. IHRA, together with the World Health Organisation, and the Open Society Institute, plan to develop a special manual and to conduct a series of training programmes to address this problem. In the future, support provided by the Department for International

Development (DfID) will facilitate more productive development of harm reduction in Russia. But, in my view, so long as the question of maintenance therapy remains taboo in this country, half the work towards reducing the negative consequences of non-medical drug use cannot proceed.

Grigorii Moshkovich, Physician-in-Chief, AIDS Centre, Nizhny Novgorod Region:

– The deepest impression of the conference in Ljubljana is the breadth and diversity of the participants. Medical and educational professionals, government officials, outreach workers, people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), and many others were in attendance. Similar to other meetings, the most important component was not simply participation in a session or in a seminar, but the opportunity to engage in informal conversations, which for me was very intensive and beneficial. I needed to know how harm reduction principles could be applied to work not only with drug users, but also with sex workers. I tried to establish contacts with those people who already had experience with such work, and succeeded. In terms of future prospects, we may speak of the future only if authorities understand that harm reduction programmes are extremely important to Russia – particularly considering the presence of three million drug users – and begin to allocate funds from the federal, regional and municipal budgets. If this does not happen, then independent sources will soon dry up, and our activities will be terminated.

Larisa Badrieva, Head, Harm Reduction Programme in Kazan:

– This is the third conference on harm reduction I have attended. George Soros and Aryeh Neier both made speeches, and perhaps their speeches produced the deepest impressions on me. The thing is that good people should be rich, because they are then able to help others. Unfortunately, there are only a few of them, but it is they who will change our world, make it better, and make it more humane. As for the prospect of developing harm reduction in Russia, I believe that there is much to be done before this philosophy and these techniques are accepted. In our country, this process is still in the beginning stages.

Vasily Donin, Deputy Chief of the Service Department, Russian Ministry of Economics:

– I was impressed by the great number of non-professionals among the participants in the conference – the multitude of those who have some sort of relation to drug use – and their activism and appeals to official authorities to protect their rights. At present, harm reduction programmes have gathered extensive experience in approaching the problem. This experience is positive, but it requires scientific assessment. I think that the process for further development must be worked out very carefully. For example, it is too early to introduce outreach work into the formal public health system. People must be prepared, well-protected socially, and their work must be regulated by legislation. For the time being, outreach may be incorporated into health education through the distribution of information materials and booklets among the public.

Lev Levinson, Assistant to State Duma Deputy Sergei Kovalev:

– I liked the radical approach to the problems discussed and the opportunity to talk broadly and frankly. We are now familiar with the details of drug policies in the USA and Europe. This is very important, and we can use this information when working on amendments to the Russian Criminal Code. Harm reduction includes a set of effective measures aimed at the improvement of public health, which includes maintenance programmes. Therefore, these programmes need to continue to struggle for the right to operate in our country, or else their expansion will be impossible.

Margarita Neliubova, Co-ordinator, Russian Round Table of the Moscow Patriarchate:

– It was important for me that at this conference I learned a lot of new information about harm reduction programmes. The Russian Orthodox Church is trying to find its place in the prevention of HIV. For example, we may participate in work on widening the availability of treatment and cutting tri-therapy prices, help PLWHA, and search for opportunities to interact with other non-governmental organisations. This activity is quite important and we have to do it together.

The next harm reduction conference will be held 6–14 April 2003, in Chiangmai, Thailand. We plan to continue the tradition of covering the results in our bulletin