HIV Cases Not Taken Seriously Enough

Following reports of multiple cases of HIV infection in eastern Uzbekistan, experts are warning that official attempts to hush the matter up could have disastrous effects on the spread of the disease.

On November 10, the Ferghana.ru website reported that 43 children had been infected with HIV at a regional hospital in Namangan. The source cited in the report, an unnamed Uzbek health ministry official, blamed the reuse of disposable syringes.

Other media outlets put the number of people infected as high as 65.

The Uzbek service of Radio Liberty reported that infected children were sent home where they were under medical supervision and receiving medication. The Namangan hospital itself was undergoing an inspection by the National Security Service and doctors from the capital Tashkent.

To date, the only official comment has come from Saidmurod Saidaliev, head of the health ministry’s epidemiology department, who gave a November 13 statement to Russian news agency Regnum denying a “mass infection” had take place, but admitting there were a number of cases in the Namangan region.

Local observers say rumours about the HIV cases have spread like wildfire and created a sense of panic.

“There hasn’t been any news about it on TV or radio, but whenever I go out of the house, I hear stories about it everywhere,” said a woman who lives in Tashkent. “I have two children and now I’m afraid to take them to the medical centre for a simple vaccination.”

To this day, Uzbek officials have not spoken publicly about the last scandal of this kind. In March 2007, information was leaked to independent media abroad that two doctors had been sent to prison for infecting nine patients with the HIV virus.

NBCentralAsia experts argue that the policy of keeping information about the spread of HIV classified, coupled with the failure to track its incidence systematically in official statistics, makes it much harder to curb the growth of HIV and AIDS in Uzbekistan.

“Official institutions including the health ministry always attempt to conceal the real number of infected and ill persons,” said a local expert.

The latest figures from the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS suggest there has been a substantial increase in HIV infection in Uzbekistan in recent years and a high level of disease spread in the region.

The AIDS Foundation East-West said that as of 2006, over 10,000 thousand HIV cases had been officially registered. (Source: http://www.afew.org/russian/aids_nis.php). Neighbouring Kazakstan, with a smaller
population, had about 7,500 people officially recorded as infected.

Uzbekistan is implementing a range of programmes to combat HIV/AIDS. It has a strategic HIV prevention programme in place and operates 15 specialist health centres. Yet it does not publish precise statistics on the number of people infected with HIV or suffering from AIDS-related illnesses.

Valentina Skryabina, who heads a non-government group in Kazakhstan called Reliable Support, says that when the Uzbeks attend regional conferences on HIV, they refuse to discuss numbers.

She fears that this reticence will cost Uzbekistan dear, “The situation may worsen since the population is growing so rapidly.”

Uzbekistan currently has 27 million people – the largest population in Central Asia – and a high birth rate of 1.2 per cent a year.

NBCentralAsia is an IWPR-funded project to create a multilingual news analysis and comment service for Central Asia, drawing on the expertise of a broad range of political observers across the region. The project ran from August 2006 to September 2007, covering all five regional states. With new funding, the service resumed in 2008, covering Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.)

**Location:** Uzbekistan

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