



Increasing HIV Awareness Among Youth in South Kazakhstan



Dr. Utebergenova and Dr. Omarova the lecturers of SKSMA meeting Professor Ramazanova and Professor Kotova to discuss planning of the educational campaign against stigma and discrimination. (Photos: Saule Mazhitova)

In 2006, 90 children under the age of five and 12 mothers in the South-Kazakhstan Oblast were found infected with HIV. The infections resulted from blood transfusions with HIV infected blood and use of unsterilized medical equipment at children medical facilities. Apart from the health problems related to HIV infection itself, these children, mothers, and their families faced stigma and discrimination that often accompany HIV. The situation required urgent interventions to educate broad population on the proper attitude to the infected individuals in order to decrease stigma and discrimination of the people living with HIV (PLHIV) and people affected by HIV. The college students were seen as one of the potentials to work in this area.

For several years the Kazakh National University (KazNMU) in Almaty was involved in HIV awareness programs for medical and non-medical students. The CAPACITY Project organized a meeting between the staffs of KazNMU and of the South-Kazakhstan State Medical Academy (SKSMA) to initiate exchange of experience leading to a similar HIV awareness program for the students in the South-Kazakhstan Oblast. The focus of the new program is to increase student awareness about the modes of HIV transmission, HIV prevention approaches, HIV testing, and AIDS treatment availability. The underlying premise of the program is that increasing awareness about HIV will decrease stigma and discrimination against PLHIV and their families.

An initial meeting took place at KazNMU in January 2007 after securing approval from the National AIDS Center, the South-Kazakhstan Oblast AIDS Center, KazNMU and SKSMA. Professors and lecturers from both universities attended and shared experiences on the implementation of HIV awareness and prevention programs. The SKSMA staff met with the chairs of Microbiology and Immunology, who shared their experience in conducting conferences, HIV and AIDS education, training sessions for students, conducting social research, and development of HIV and AIDS training modules and materials.

The CAPACITY Project, in cooperation with SKSMA staff, developed an action plan with a number of objectives: to create a youth-trainer center for HIV prevention, to assess the current level of HIV awareness, to conduct interactive training among staff and students if the institutes in Shymkent, to reassess the level of awareness after conducting these activities and to culminate the initial educational campaign by an HIV/AIDS conference at the Medical Academy. CAPACITY also prepared materials on how to overcome HIV/AIDS stigma and discrimination, brochures covering HIV prevention, condoms and pre- and post-test questionnaires for the SKSMA activities.

By the end of February 2007 training for the students living at a dormitory of SKSMA and a workshop on HIV prevention, drug use, and healthy lifestyles in the Kazakh-Turkish University in Shymkent had been completed. Members of the South-Kazakhstan Business Women Association and specialists from the Shymkent Healthy Lifestyle Center participated as trainers for these educational activities. Additionally, two groups of volunteer students have been selected to be trained on HIV and AIDS issues. The assessment of the HIV awareness level among youth has been initiated.