

HIV/AIDS training in Russia: “To know means to live”

The 100th Session of the International Labour Conference also marks one year since the adoption of ILO Recommendation No. 200 – the first international human rights instrument to focus specifically on the issue of HIV/AIDS in the world of work. The Recommendation aims to strengthen the contribution of the world of work to universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support and contains provisions on potentially life-saving prevention programmes for all groups of workers, including young workers and persons in training. This story is about “Your Health” – an innovative training course for vocational schools in Russia.

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MOSCOW (ILO Online) – According to ILO experts, one of the main reasons for the high growth of the HIV epidemic in Russia (the increase is one of the world's fastest) is the lack of access to basic HIV and prevention information, especially among high-risk groups such as young people. As many as 75 per cent of HIV-positive individuals in the CIS countries, including Russia, are under 30 years old.

To address this challenge, the ILO Project “Comprehensive Partnership Strategies of HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) Among Young People of the Russian Federation” came up with an idea to develop a modular training manual for teenagers – vocational school students who will soon enter the labour market.

“From the very beginning the authors of the manual agreed on three main principles: Be short, be informative, be appealing. The latter principle was particularly important: If you tell a young audience textbook maxims, like ‘behave well, be healthy’, they will soon get bored and stop listening,” says Elena Kudriavtseva, ILO’s HIV/AIDS focal point for Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

“So we had to motivate young people, to make them look at their health from a new angle. That is how we came to the ‘health as labour resource’ concept. We say: ‘Look, your health is your treasure, your resource given to you at birth. In the future it will help you sustain yourself and your family. Now we are going to discuss with you how to treat this resource rationally.’ And this approach works very well,” Elena explains.

The “Your Health” training manual, developed with ILO support, aims to stimulate and maintain the interest of young people in their health, as well as building behavioural skills and models that encourage an optimum level of health. The manual covers 11 topics, examining key aspects of health and a healthy lifestyle of contemporary youth, such as personal hygiene, nutrition, family planning, prevention of HIV, STI, alcoholic addiction, smoking and drug abuse.

Two years ago the manual won the All-Russian contest “HIV/AIDS: To Know Means To Live” in a nomination “Best printed material on HIV prevention for educational institutions”. The contest organizer, the Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-Being, printed a high number of copies of the manual and sent them out to all the Russian regions. As a result the Altay territory and the Volgograd region have incorporated the “Your Health” training course into the curriculum of basic vocational education; the Moscow region’s ministry of education endorsed the course as one of four regional educational programmes recommended for the prevention of antisocial behaviour among young people.

The next step was to train vocational school teachers to deliver the course, and, as it turned out, this was a much more challenging task.

During a preliminary survey organized in vocational schools, students indicated family planning, STI and HIV/AIDS as the most interesting issues in the “Your Health” manual. And these were exactly the issues teachers refused to discuss with their students because traditionally it was considered inappropriate to talk about that in public.

“In the beginning I simply could not force myself to pronounce the word ‘condom’ in class – I said ‘this thing’ instead,” recalls a 40-year-old teacher from the city of Biysk in the Altai krai. “Now I can freely talk about HIV and safe sex behaviour, and I must admit: This open talk has helped me to build better relations and create at atmosphere of trust between me and my students.”

Learning how to take informed decisions

“Another problem was more of psychological character. ‘Your Health’ is an interactive course, build on free exchange of opinions where a teacher acts more as a coordinator or a facilitator who helps the students assess their health risks, take informed decisions and change their behaviour if necessary,” explains Vladlena Diachkova, a trainer.

“Everything in the training environment should facilitate equal and interactive discussion, even the furniture in the classroom should be rearranged: Desks removed, chairs placed in a ‘conference’ position. While students got used to this new setting very fast, teachers, especially the ones brought up in old teaching traditions felt very uncomfortable. They insisted to be seated at a table and to put their table in a dominating position at the front of the class. We had to explain then that barrier-free environment was absolutely vital to create a new atmosphere of trust and openness,” Vladlena says.

These initial difficulties are now in the past and the “Your Health” training course is well-integrated in the curriculum of many vocational instructions in Russia, and is more and more appreciated both by the students and the school management. “Our college trains workers of various construction sectors, says a director of a vocational school in Volgograd. In the ‘Your Health’ training course we put special emphasis on HIV/AIDS and STI. The reason is that our graduates – mostly young men – usually join construction teams and go to other regions, where they should be aware of what is high-risk behaviour in order to make safe choices about their health and relationships.”

Thanks to “Your Health” and other similar training courses, there are more and more young people who treat their health in a responsible way – as a valuable labour resource – among vocational school graduates who enter the Russian labour market today.