International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Calls for better access to testing and treatment at HIV/AIDS conference

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Massimo Barra, President of ERNA, at the 5th EECA AIDS conference in Moscow called for bringing screening for HIV "out of the hospitals and onto the streets," to reach marginalized groups. Andreea Anca, IFRC

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As the HIV epidemic continues to grow in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has called for better access to diagnosis and treatment for people at high-risk of contracting the illness.

"HIV screening must be brought out of the hospitals, clinics and centres and onto the streets," said Massimo Barra, President of European Red Cross and Red Crescent Network on HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis (ERNA) at the largest HIV forum in the region. The need to effectively "identify, reach, test and treat" high-risk groups who might be reluctant access the health system because of stigma and discrimination was also highlighted.

The 5th Eastern Europe and Central Asia AIDS Conference held in Moscow between 23 - 25 March was attended by 2,500 experts from 79 countries.

Scientists, medics and community workers shared best practices and strategies, as part of the region's ongoing efforts to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030 – a target set by the UN. Representatives from Brazil, India, China, South Africa, where the number of infections have significantly dropped, were also invited to share their experiences.

The conference addressed the need for a change in approach to tackling the disease in the region, where the number of new infections has risen by 30 per cent between 2000-2014.[1]

Bridging the gap

IFRC Director of Health in Geneva, Julie Hall addressed the importance of creating effective systems that put local communities at the heart of health programmes.

She said: "HIV diagnosis and treatment needs to seamlessly link homes to community-based care to bridge the gap between health officials and marginalized communities at high risk of contracting the disease." As auxiliary to government in humanitarian and health-related matters, Hall drew attention to the privileged relationship Red Cross and Red Crescents across the world have with decision-makers.

Hall also emphasized the role Red Cross workers present in all communities across the region.

"They provide the essential human touch that complements advanced medical treatments, contributing essentially to the prevention and effective treatment of people affected," she said.

IFRC senior health advisor, Lasha Goguadze addressed the importance of treating HIV - affected migrants with dignity and respect for their safety, while ensuring they have access to treatment. He also talked about the role Red Cross volunteers having access to people out of reach of official health workers.

The Regional Health Initiative - the main HIV-related Red Cross programme in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia - is funded by the American Red Cross. Lisa Walker, senior programme officer from the American Red Cross, discussed the organization's exit strategy from the region next year. She also highlighted the programme's impact on the people it has served as well as on the long-term development of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies that implemented it.

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[1] UNAIDS*: AIDS by the numbers 2015*