



SUCCESS STORY

New Mother Learns to Live with HIV

A USAID-funded hospital helps an HIV-positive mother cope

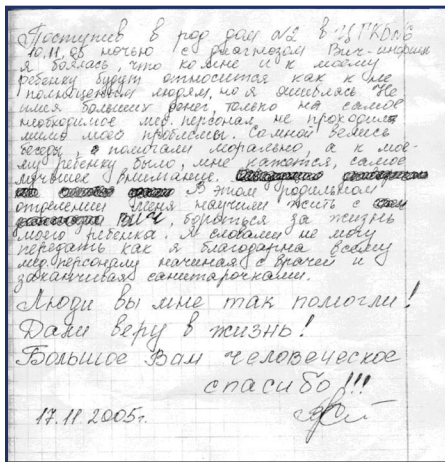


Photo: John Snow, Inc./Oleksandr Golubov

Viktoriya's letter to the USAID-funded maternity hospital in Donetsk.

“My words fail to express how thankful I am to the entire health care staff, from the doctors to the hospital attendants. At this maternity center, I was taught to live with HIV and to fight for my child's life,” said Viktoriya, an HIV-positive mother. USAID supports efforts to help people affected and infected by HIV/AIDS In coordination with the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief,

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Viktoriya, a young woman who lives in the village of Volnovaha outside Donetsk, has had a year filled with emotions — both joyful and sad. First she discovered that she was pregnant. Then, she learned that she was HIV positive. She faced the difficult task of dealing with her own uncertain future while preparing to take responsibility for another life.

Viktoriya, 24, decided to give birth in Donetsk at a USAID-funded maternity hospital that works with HIV positive mothers. Doctors there put Vikoriya on anti-retroviral drugs, and a women's center provided her with HIV/AIDS counseling. After following her treatment regime carefully, she delivered a healthy baby boy.

Viktoriya's story is not unusual — 60 to 70 percent of HIV-positive women in Ukraine learn the news when they are pregnant. Like these other women, Viktoriya now faces two uphill battles — one against the disease and one against the stigma and discrimination that comes with HIV/AIDS in her society.

In Ukraine, discrimination can even be institutionalized. “Infected woman are placed in separate maternity wards, as part of an extraordinary and baseless system of protecting the rest of the population,” explained Dr. Ihor Semenenko, who works with USAID's HIV/AIDS program in Ukraine. When giving birth, these women are often attended by medical personnel with little knowledge of HIV/AIDS who are afraid of interacting with infected patients. One of USAID's goals is to change the way that hospitals accommodate and provide services to HIV-positive patients, including expectant mothers. The program also hosts educational seminars, trainings, and roundtables for medical workers, where doctors and nurses are taught that with a few additional precautions HIV/AIDS patients should be treated no differently than any others.

While Viktoriya realizes the challenges of staying healthy and coping with the stigma of HIV/AIDS, she is upbeat. In a thank you letter to the hospital, she explained how the staff had changed her attitude towards HIV/AIDS. “The health staff did not ignore my problems. They talked to me, they helped me psychologically, and I think my child was being treated with the best attention,” she wrote. With the hope and strength she gained, she will continue to fight hard to overcome the challenges ahead.