Midwives in Kyrgyzstan Excel in Providing Family Planning and IUD Services in Rural Areas

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There has been growing talk in recent years of the effect of the "brain drain" on the former Soviet countries of Central Asia, and in particular the weakening effect that emigration of large numbers of skilled workers has had on health care systems in the region. With the promise of better wages and employment opportunities, many Kyrgyz health care professionals have sought work abroad. Many others choose to make their homes in larger cities, where wages and employment opportunities tend to be more advantageous.

The provision of quality family planning services in rural areas of Kyrgyzstan is one objective of the health care system that is particularly vulnerable to shifts in the availability of skilled health care providers. Obstetrician-gynecologists (Ob/Gyns) play an important role in family planning because they are trained to deliver intrauterine device (IUD) services and, until recently, were the only health care providers officially authorized to do so. However, Ob/Gyns are concentrated primarily in urban areas of the country, and because the IUD is the most popular form of female contraception in Kyrgyzstan, a lack of Ob/Gyns in rural areas limits access to this most widely accepted method of contraception.

Pilot Project

In 2003, the USAID-funded ZdravPlus project and the Kyrgyzstan Ministry of Health (MOH) launched an innovative pilot project that sought to ensure the availability of quality family planning services, including IUD services, for women in rural areas by training midwives in contraceptive technology and the provision of IUD services.

The project demonstrated that, with appropriate training and supervision, midwives were very capable of providing basic primary health care services beyond their current scope of work. Since its inception in Bazar-Korgon Rayon, Jalal-Abad Oblast, in 2003, the pilot has been embraced by the MOH and has been successfully expanded to six additional rayons (districts) in four oblasts (provinces) of the country where there are insufficient Ob/Gyns to reach primary health care facilities at least once per week. These site include Suzak (Jalal-Abad Oblast); Aktalaa, Kochkor, Atbashy, and Jumgal (Naryn Oblast); and Jayul (Chuy Oblast).

Damira Keldibekova, a midwife from Orto-Suu village in Jayl Rayon, practices her IUD insertion skills with a mannequin during the intensive training course

The Family Planning and IUD Training

The 12-day Family Planning (FP) and IUD training course prepares midwives to counsel their clients on a full range of contraceptive methods – not only IUD – in order to ensure that women receive all the information they need to choose a method that is most convenient and appropriate for their needs. Adapted from a curriculum for doctors, the course is supplemented with additional time for theoretical training and extensive clinical practice – first with mannequins, and then with patients under the supervision of trainers.

At a recent awards ceremony for graduates of the training, Chinara, a midwife from Jayul Rayon, recounted her patients' appreciation for her new skills. "Women come to me and say, 'Why couldn't you do this before? Give thanks to those

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who taught you how to do all this. It is cheaper for us than traveling to the city'." Dogdurbubu, also a midwife from Jayul, commented, "Women gladly come to me. I can insert and remove IUDs and dispense birth control pills, condoms, and good advice."

Building more convenient and affordable access to family planning services is an important goal of the training program. ZdravPlus's paramount concern, however, is the safety of patients, and every effort is made to protect women's health through three strategies:

- *Ensuring the competency of midwives during training.* Midwives must demonstrate their competence first with mannequins and then with at least eight patients before returning to their workplace.
- *Monitoring the clinical skills of midwives at their worksites over a six-month period.* Three follow-up visits are conducted with each midwife at her place of work.
- *Surveying recipients of IUD services,* two months and five months after training. Client surveys are designed to reveal any complications women might have experienced that could have led them to go to another provider for follow-up care, to measure the quality of care provided by the midwives from a patient's perspective, and to assess client satisfaction.

Monitoring and Client Survey Results

Rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the project over the past four years has consistently shown that midwives are able to 1) master the content of the training; 2) put their skills to safe, effective use in their places of work; and 3) earn the trust and appreciation of their clients.

During the second half of 2006, ZdravPlus supported the rollout of the FP and IUD training to the three newest project rayons: Atbashy and Jumgal in Naryn Oblast, and Jayul in Chui Oblast. In late summer, the FP and IUD training was conducted for 15 rural midwives in Atbashy Rayon whose average clinical knowledge and skills rose from 30% (pre-test) to 82% (post-test) following their training.

In Jumgal, Kochkor, and Jayul Rayons, three rounds of monitoring to observe midwifery skills were completed and a client survey conducted. During monitoring, skills were assessed using a checklist of key steps that midwives should follow when counseling patients.

The monitoring checklist includes many different skills, such as counseling on oral contraceptives, IUD insertion, removal and counseling, and the lactation amenorrhea method. Data from across the three rayons over the three monitoring visits showed that midwives are amply skilled to provide quality care for their patients:

- Instrument sterilization improved from 57.7% to 71.7% over the course of the monitoring visits.
- Consultation on general family planning improved: 53.3%; 76.2%; and 76.5% respectively.
- Consultation before IUD insertion improved from 76.8% to 87.9%

IUD patient survey results are also encouraging. Two rounds of recent surveys in Kochkor showed that 97.7% of women were shown their IUD device before insertion; 96.9% were instructed to return for a follow-up visit three to six weeks following IUD insertion; and 78.6% were informed of the risks associated with use of IUD. 98.5% of women said they would recommend their midwife to a friend or relative who needed IUD services.

Implications

ZdravPlus plans to support the rollout of FP and IUD trainings to a total of 12 rayons by 2009. The training will also be implemented simultaneously in Kyrgyzstan's Family Medicine Training Centers, in collaboration with the Kyrgyz State Medical Institute on Retraining and Continuous Education, thus exposing trainers at the post-graduate institute to international competency-based training approaches.

The midwife FP and IUD trainings have brought quality family planning services within the reach of thousands of rural women in Kyrgyzstan over the past four years. By optimizing on the capacity of mid-level health care professionals, the trainings have given midwives a new sense of confidence and have proven an effective tool in addressing the need for quality primary health care services in Kyrgyzstan's rural communities.

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