

Road to Results

ACHIEVING SUCCESS STEP BY STEP

“There is No Place for Anemia”

A ZdravPlus Health Promotion Campaign in Ferghana Oblast, Uzbekistan

February 2002

Almost eighty percent of children and women of reproductive age in Uzbekistan’s Ferghana valley are anemic, leading to less energy and reduced immune function. Pregnant women with anemia are at risk of pregnancy complications and giving birth to anemic, low birth weight, or premature babies and children are often behind in their intellectual development. Concerned about anemia, the Ferghana Oblast Health Department asked the ZdravPlus Project to conduct a health promotion campaign on the topic.

ZdravPlus faced a number of challenges in designing the campaign. Formative research indicated that causes of anemia in women and children include widespread poverty, inaccurate information about nutrition, limited food choices, and cultural practices determining which family members eat meat. Furthermore, the campaign had to focus on *nutritional* responses to anemia. There is no food fortification program in Uzbekistan and iron supplements are available only in pharmacies — in doses too low to have much impact on anemia and at prices that consume a large part of a typical family’s income.

In response, ZdravPlus planned a comprehensive health promotion campaign that included mass media marketing, education-entertainment, print materials, and interpersonal communications. The campaign used key messages based on three widely available types of food that should be eaten to prevent anemia and help cure it: meat or fish; legumes, rice, or sorghum; and vegetables, fruits and greens. When meat is unavailable — as is often the case in Ferghana — the other two types of foods, eaten together, also provide iron. The campaign incorporated an educational soap opera, radio and TV ads, posters and brochures, a theater play, as well as interpersonal communications designed by health educators. ZdravPlus intended to introduce modern nutrition concepts and begin to integrate them into the health delivery

system, as well as addressing the social issues behind anemia in women and children.

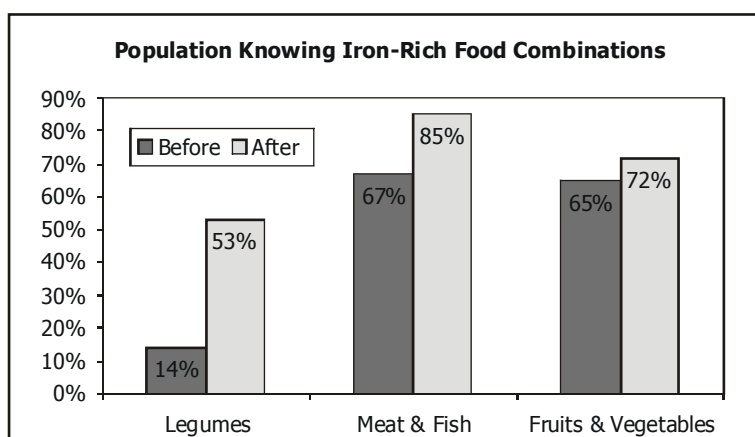
The plan for the campaign was met with widespread skepticism among policymakers. Prevention through nutrition was a new concept; the health system in Uzbekistan focuses on curative care with extensive reliance on hospitalization. Hematologists dominate the field of anemia, and nutritionists are unknown. Anemia was something to be cured, not prevented; so educational efforts were thought to be a risky waste of money.

ZdravPlus responded by informing key Ministry of Health officials at the national and oblast levels about international approaches to nutrition and anemia. The evidence-based approaches embodied in WHO guidelines proved convincing for many and the new information about nutrition engendered much interest and debate. The campaign in Ferghana Oblast could go ahead — but it was clear that it needed to be accompanied by training for health care providers, so they could provide information consistent with the campaign’s messages to the population. Hundreds of doctors and nurses were trained throughout the oblast.

The centerpiece of the campaign was a television soap opera “Simple Truth”, that tells the story of a typical Uzbek family and how anemia and a doctor’s recommendations for curing it lead to family crises — with a happy ending. The drama features a husband, a traditional and demure young wife, a mother-in-law, and even a sorcerer. After many twists and turns in a plot involving suspicions of amorous encounters, family rifts, and failed sorcery, the local SVP doctor convinces the mother-in-law that her family’s anemia must be cured and persuades her to take responsibility for ensuring that the family is treated and eats right from now on. Neighbors recognize that they, too, have anemia and all want to learn from the doctor how they should eat right to avoid anemia.



The USAID-funded ZdravPlus Program provides technical assistance and training to improve the health of Central Asian populations by improving health delivery systems



“Simple Truth” was aired on Ferghana television stations over the six-week duration of the campaign. Six 60-second TV and radio spots, many using the characters from the soap opera, provided repetition of key messages. People were amazed at the use of commercial marketing strategies to promote public health — and reacted overwhelmingly positively to this new concept for Uzbekistan.

A number of creative ideas were developed by health educators for the campaign. Two “food fairs” were held, featuring information about nutrition, as well as displays of iron-rich foods and cooking demonstrations using these foods. The food fairs included contests for the best iron-rich menus, including salads, first and second courses.

The campaign also sought to address social issues affecting the nutrition of women and children. Research revealed that according to tradition, working men eat first, followed by elders, children and, last of all, women. When there is little meat, which is often the case, women and children may get none at all. To address this, a television spot showed an Uzbek husband ensuring that his wife ate meat to stay healthy.

At the end of the campaign, public knowledge on nutrition had measurably increased.

A quantitative survey (results shown on the left) found a significant increase in knowledge of iron-rich food combinations. In addition to the formal surveys, there was considerable anecdotal evidence on the impact of the campaign. People in Ferghana were heard to be discussing anemia and wondering why there was so much attention being paid to the subject.

Although the campaign is over, ZdravPlus’ work on anemia and nutrition issues will continue. Deep-rooted nutrition habits do not change as a result of one six-week campaign, even coupled with training workshops for medical workers. Such change can take years. The materials and messages developed for the campaign will be reworked over the life of the project and put before the public again. They will be woven into new materials and campaigns on other health topics, such as child health, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases. The campaign has also pointed to an urgent need for more in-depth education of the public and medical workers on breastfeeding and complementary feeding — topics for future campaigns. Thus, the anemia campaign laid the foundation for a future agenda for ZdravPlus and others.

The USAID-funded ZdravPlus Project (2000–2005) seeks to improve the quality and efficiency of health services in five countries of Central Asia. This entails support for the governments’ health reform agenda as well as training, technical assistance, and the provision of limited amounts of equipment to primary health care entities. Health promotion/health education supports these efforts by helping the public take greater responsibility for its own health, by improving their understanding of health care topics and encouraging healthy lifestyles.

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