

# Road to Results

ACHIEVING SUCCESS STEP BY STEP

## Kyrgyzstan MOH Press Center: Bringing Important Information to the Public

November 2004

In the 1990s, Elena Bayalinova worked as a television journalist. She became interested in health issues, but found the system extremely frustrating. As she describes it, the Ministry of Health (MOH) was traditionally a closed institution—sharing virtually no statistics or health information. The health care system in Kyrgyzstan was undergoing rapid change, but much of the change was confusing and information remained out of reach to the general public. Bayalinova saw the need to get the information out.



Center Director Elena Bayalinova

### Creation of the Ministry of Health Press Center

When the USAID-funded ZdravPlus project came together with the MOH to create a Press Center in 2002, Bayalinova was recruited to run the center: “Maybe because I was out there demanding that the MOH improve their information dissemination they decided to hire me and let me figure out how to get information out.”

Early on in the health care reform process, it had become clear that people had to be educated about the reforms if they were to succeed. With that in mind, the Press Center was established to institutionalize policy marketing—the dissemination of information to the population about how the reforms affect them and their health—into the Ministry of Health.

Today, the Press Center, which is housed in two

rooms of the Ministry of Health, employs three staff, including a researcher/webmaster, a cameraman/producer, and Bayalinova who serves as director, writer, editor, and PR specialist. The center is charged with distributing information on health care reform through television, radio, and print media.

The Center’s daily activities include collecting and disseminating information on health care reform, laws, and prikazes to journalists and NGOs; maintenance of a website about the health care system; review of press articles on health care; organizing and moderating roundtables and seminars on health care reform; producing video materials on health care topics; and responding to information requests.

### Meeting Challenges

While the goal of the Press Center is quite clear—to educate the population about the health care reforms, with the mass media as a primary tool—some of the preconditions to reach this goal have proven difficult: including how to educate journalists that they should understand and cover the health reforms and how to institutionalize information dissemination in the MOH.

The Press Center’s approach in addressing both of these challenges stems from its understanding that the health care reforms are the key to improving health care for the population. Based on this starting point, the Center saw that the best way to ensure positive, accurate press coverage was encourage discussion and understanding of the issues, through seminars and by showing journalists the reforms in action. In summer 2003, for example, just before co-payments for health care were to be introduced in South Kyrgyzstan, the Press Center arranged a field trip for journalists to Issyk Kul Oblast in the north, where co-payments had been piloted and the system was already working. The journalists were able to see the reforms in action and to interview health care workers and patients.



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

The journalists not only had a story to tell their readers about what they saw that day, but they also gained a personal appreciation for the benefits of the reforms and a desire to cover the issues.

Bayalinova and her team spent quite a bit of time working closely with their colleagues in the MOH, reminding them to include the Press Center in their events. While the work of the Press Center used to be an afterthought for many busy MOH staff, they soon saw the benefit of disseminating information and Bayalinova reports that the Center is now brought in for almost all MOH events. They are working closely with partners, such as the Mandatory Health Insurance Fund and the Family Group Practice Association to produce materials—including press releases, video clips, brochures, and posters— and carry out roundtables for both medical workers and community representatives.

### **Achievements**

“One of our biggest achievements has come from educating colleagues about the Law on Freedom of Information. Armed with a copy of this law and an explanation of the rights it guarantees, journalists have been empowered to demand information from the MOH. For their part, MOH officials have learned that it is part of their job to provide such information to the public.”

Through its ongoing work with journalists, the Press Center has inspired the press corps to make health a priority. During a May 2003 seminar on health care reform, participating journalists took the initiative to pass a resolution of their own on cooperation between the MOH and the media in providing objective coverage of the health care reforms, committing to a *proactive* role in educating the population about the changes in the health care system.

ZdravPlus has provided significant technical assistance to the Center, working closely with Bayalinova to ensure that she and her team are informed about the importance of the various

health care reforms and to provide them with international experience and marketing expertise to help develop their work. The Center receives funding from ZdravPlus/USAID to cover some basic administrative and travel costs, and office space is provided by the Ministry of Health. Bayalinova finds other funding for the Center herself, from a variety of international organizations, and manages to receive free airtime and print space from local media outlets.

“We do lots of work on our own initiative, work for which we do not have funding. We go out and cover the important topics in health care and health reform and share the materials with our colleagues in the press. We even take professional footage on our own and pass it along to television stations that do not have the resources to travel on-site to get their own material. But, we always try to take journalists with us and let them see things for themselves whenever possible.”



*Journalists at the May 2003 Press Center seminar which resulted in the resolution to provide objective coverage of the health reforms*

The success of the Center is largely the result of the transparency which the Press Center has helped to instill in the Ministry of Health and the genuine interest in health care reform that they have nurtured by informing journalists. “Today, the vast majority of coverage of health care is both accurate and positive,” Bayalinova proudly notes.

## **For more information**

### **Office in Kazakhstan**

39 Begalina Street  
Almaty, Kazakhstan 480100  
Tel: (3272)915-775, 919-285  
Fax: (3272)919-370  
E-mail: office@zplus.kz

### **Office in Kyrgyzstan**

1 Togolok Moldo Street  
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan 720405  
Tel: (996-312)663-816, 663-708  
Fax: (996-312)661-024  
E-mail: abt\_bish@infotel.kg

### **Office in Uzbekistan**

16 Bozbozor Street  
Tashkent, Uzbekistan 700007  
Tel: (998-71)169-2212, 169-1491  
Fax: (998-71)169-1492  
E-mail: abt@zdravplus.uz

### **Office in Tajikistan**

10 Chapaeva Street  
Dushanbe, Tajikistan 734025  
Tel: (992-372)276-265, 231-717  
Fax: (992-372)276-265  
E-mail: zdrav@tajnet.com

### **Office in Turkmenistan**

43 Gyorogly Street, # 4  
Ashgabad, Turkmenistan 744020  
Tel: (993-12)344-242  
Fax: (993-12)344-242  
E-mail: natalyazp@online.tm