



Ukraine has one of the lowest incidences of AIDS in the world. Currently, 6 Ukrainians per 10 million are estimated as having the disease, compared to rates 10 times higher in Poland, and over 200 times higher in Romania. But the spread of AIDS in Ukraine is accelerating rapidly, and, in view of the large number of high-risk groups in the country, is regarded as a serious and escalating problem.

Since 1994, the Canada-Ukraine Partners in Health Program has conducted several projects designed to combat the spread of AIDS in Ukraine. Its most recent project has been conducted in conjunction with the President of Ukraine's National Anti-AIDS Committee.

Established in 1992, the President's Committee has undertaken to visit communities in all regions of Ukraine, with an educational package combining medical and preventative information about AIDS and HIV infection. The Committee's program brings together medical and educational specialists with actors, musicians, and singers to present the Ukrainian public with a wide range of AIDS awareness messages.

#### A 75-YEAR TRADITION

As the main delivery medium for its program, the Committee has adopted a method pioneered in Ukraine over 75 years ago: the educational train. The power of the railway to spread information was first harnessed in 1918, in the effort to unite the new Soviet by propaganda about the state, its ideology, and the problems facing it. The concept of 'agitatsya propaganda' was born, in educational train tours networking

#### Partners-in-Health Project

## CANADA-UKRAINE PARTNERSHIP BATTLES AIDS

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the entire Union.

One of the primary functions of the early 'agit prop' trains was the spreading of knowledge about health. In the 1920s and early 1930s, the trains carried popular education on topics ranging from alcoholism and tuberculosis to healthy child-birth and the improvement of working conditions (see inset article). Today, each of these problems is joined by the new threat of HIV infection and AIDS; and the decision of the President's National Anti-AIDS Committee to use the national railway as a major mode of health education delivery is thus one which combines traditional expertise with timeliness.

To date, HIV infection is centred mainly in Odessa, Kyiv, and in the other major urban areas of Ukraine. But, as in other parts of the world, it is also spreading rapidly to Ukraine's rural communities along the highways and rail routes. However, one region of the country as yet virtually untouched by the spread of HIV infection is Volynsk, Ukraine's north-western oblast.

#### THE APRIL 1995 PROJECT

In April 1995, a team of six Canadian

educators, including teachers and media specialists, travelled with Ukraine's Presidential Committee to schools and institutes in Kyiv and Volynsk. Within a 2-week period, the tour brought AIDS information and awareness to thousands of young people in 12 schools and institutes. The students attended lectures by medical specialists, and concerts by actors and musicians. In addition, the Canadian team members taught and collected data from 384 students aged between 12 and 27 years. Sometimes the project team visited schools and other centres in the community; at other times, the community came to the educational train, to view films in the travelling classroom or to visit the discotheque.

The information collected in the Volynsk towns of Lutsk, Kovel, Bereschencko, and Shatsk reflects a community which has already taken a firm stance with respect to AIDS prevention. It also reflects a teenage population whose sexual activity is firmly moderated by a solid framework of community values. The project team gathered this information directly from the students of Volynsk themselves, in discussions on subjects ranging widely from abstinence to non-penetrative sex.

Naturally, public discussion of topics such as these is as embarrassing and inhibiting in Ukraine as it is anywhere in the world. For this reason, the Canadian project members introduced a new element into the team's methodology: the use of hand-held push-button units, by which as many as 64 students at once can respond to questions about AIDS and sexual practice nonverbally, anonymously, and confidentially. Instantly analyzed by computer in the students' presence, the data indicate the areas of their knowledge which need immediate elucidation. They also provide insights into the educational messages most urgently needed by students in the different gender and age groups.

The students of Kyiv and Volynsk demonstrated high levels of AIDS awareness, and a commendable sense of



Canadian team of AIDS educators and media specialists. (Dr. Baggaley, far left)