

## **Lives Renewed: The Emergence of a Breast Cancer Survivor Movement in Ukraine**

### **Background**

Breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer death among women in Ukraine. Approximately 15,000 new cases are identified annually and about 8,000 women die per year. Due to the difficult economic conditions that continue to grip post-Soviet Ukraine, medical providers face great challenges in providing basic primary health care, let alone early detection services and optimal clinical care for women with the disease. In addition to the physical toll that breast cancer takes, the psychosocial needs of women diagnosed with the disease are great, and these are rarely recognized formally or addressed. Since 1997, a remarkable transformation has begun to take place, however. In a few short years, a nascent breast cancer survivor movement has emerged in Ukraine, which promises ultimately to challenge societal stigmatization of the disease. Women in a number of cities are now demanding more information and embracing the concepts of self-help and mutual support. As of early 2005, survivor groups had been formed in 22 cities, representing nearly all of the *oblasts* (provinces) of the country, and many have begun implementing peer support volunteer programs through which survivors provide information and emotional support to newly diagnosed women who are hospitalized. Further, a national federation of survivor groups has been formally created.

Perhaps most important, women who have lived through the disease are beginning to speak out publicly, and in doing so, they

have begun the important process of challenging long-held societal views about cancer and have opened the door for other women to come forward. Indeed, they are serving as living proof that they not only survived breast cancer, but they also have gone on to live normal, productive lives.

### **The project**

In 1997, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) supported a three-year Breast Cancer Assistance Program to strengthen early detection, diagnosis, and treatment services in Ukraine. The program was managed by PATH and concluded in 2000.

### **Program objectives**

The three-year program sought to improve the quality of breast cancer services for screening, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation; to optimize the utilization of services among women at risk; and to enhance the cost-effectiveness of providing services through existing facilities and within existing resource constraints. An additional key objective was to improve the quality of life of women experiencing the disease by providing them with information and psychosocial support and by encouraging the formation of community-based breast cancer survivor groups.

PATH worked at the national level and at four regional oncology centers (Kyiv, Odesa, Lviv, and Chernihiv), paying particular attention to women exposed to radiation from the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident.

## Program results

In addition to the establishment of a viable and active breast cancer survivor movement that thrives today in Ukraine, other program highlights included the following:

- Providing equipment and supplies for mammography screening and diagnosis and for upgrading pathology diagnostic services.
- Training over 1,100 health care professionals in clinical breast examination at several training sites throughout Ukraine, using a curriculum that PATH developed.
- Conducting training workshops on mammography positioning/reading and ultrasound-guided biopsy.
- Organizing training for Ukrainian specialists in breast cancer pathology in study tours to Seattle.
- Conducting three national scientific symposia.
- Establishing a pilot screening program based at the Chernihiv Oblast Oncology Center.
- Adapting and disseminating over 250,000 copies of various culturally adapted brochures on breast cancer.

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## About PATH

PATH creates sustainable, culturally relevant solutions that enable communities worldwide to break longstanding cycles of poor health. By collaborating with diverse public- and private-sector partners, we help provide appropriate health technologies and vital strategies that change the way people think and act. Our work improves global health and well-being. For more information, please visit [www.path.org](http://www.path.org).