

Dynamics of Reproductive Health in Belarus after Cairo Conference.

Zinaida A. Sevkovskaia, Specialist of Reproductive Health Department of Scientific Research Institute for Mother&Child Care of Republic of Belarus.

The necessity to meet the needs of people during their life course widened the conception of mother and child health care and that of family planning, as the elements of primary health care, to the conception of reproductive health care. Reproductive health is the most important part of health as a whole and occupies the central place in human development. Reproductive health deals with private and the most valuable aspects of life. Being not only the reflection of health in childhood and adolescence it also makes the basis of health in post-reproductive years of life both for women and men and it predetermines the consequences passed from one generation to the next one. Reproductive health care during the life course is one of the main trends in public health.

Reproductive health care in Belarus is carried out within such conceptual state documents which are based on the decisions of ICPD as:

- National Plan for the Improvement of Women Status for 1996 – 2000;
- Republican Programme “Women of the Republic of Belarus” (1995 – 2000);
- Presidential Programme “Children of Belarus” (2001-2005);
- Law of the Republic of Belarus “On Health Care” (adopted on 11 January 2002);
- “Main Directions of Demographic Policy with Regard for Sustainable Development of Economy in Transition” (approved in 1998);
- Law of the Republic of Belarus “On Demographic Security of the Republic of Belarus” (adopted in 2002);
- Republican Programme “Youth of the Republic of Belarus” (1999 – 2003);
- National Action Plan to Ensure Gender Equality for the 2001 – 2005 (adopted in 2001).

The reforms to improve the quality and accessibility of health care to women and children aim, on the one hand, to introduce modern technologies of intensive care and diagnostics using expensive medical and equipment and, on the other hand, to develop public health care system and disease prevention at primary health care level. The reforms enabled to achieve reduction of children mortality due to different causes and reduction the frequency of abortions. It should be mentioned that the this results were achieved in spite of the economic crisis in Belarus which led to deterioration of health in the majority of population, increase of total mortality (1990 – 10.6‰; 1995 – 13‰; 2002 – 14.8‰), induced living of many families below the poverty line.

Introduction of public health care principles in the system of reproductive health care in Belarus started in the middle of 90-ies. The first step was the regionalisation of perinatal and neonatal care, establishment of 2nd and 3rd level centres for pregnant women of “high risk” and severely ill new-born, and the system of reanimation care including mobile teams. Both on the account of the Ministry of Health and on the account of sponsor investments the above centres were equipped with the necessary medical equipment, training for medical staff was carried out and is regularly organised.

The second trend of our activity was the change of approaches to health care at the primary health care level, i.e. at the communal level. One of the principles for the activity is intersectoral and multidisciplinary approach, involvement of people in solving the problems of their own health.

The main indicators of mother and child care in Belarus in 1994 – 2002 are listed in the table below:

Indicators	1995	1998	2000	2001	2002
Perinatal mortality (‰)	12,2	9,2	7,4	7,4	6,4
Neonatal mortality (‰)	8,3	6,0	4,7	4,4	3,8
Infant mortality (‰)	13,3	11,3	9,3	9,1	7,8
Maternal mortality (per 100 000 of life births)	13,8	25,6	24,2	12,9	21,1
Number of abortions:					
- per 1000 women of childbearing age	72,6	54,1	46,1	38,2	33,6
- per 100 life births	184	160	130	111	100

Currently the Republic of Belarus pays more and more attention of the system of reproductive health of families, providing families with opportunities to use the necessary information on family planning as well as dissemination of modern knowledge on culture of reproductive behavior. According to the Order of the Ministry of Health Care “On Measures, Aimed at Strengthening of Reproductive Health” (adopted in 1998) cabinets of family planning have been opened in all women’s consultations points. National Action Plan, aimed at ensuring gender equality during 2001 – 2005 contains a number of measures to protect reproductive health, including widening of the range of services in the sphere of family planning, sexual education of young people, prevention of sexually transmitted infections. Certain measures are designed to promote men’s responsible behaviour in the issues of sexual and reproductive health.

Problems of adolescents and young people have a special place in our activities. During this period the behaviour structure is formed, which to a large extend determines health of an adult and his/her longevity. Analysis of adolescents’ morbidity confirms the tendency of somatic health deterioration in this group of population. Approximately 10% of adolescents have chronic diseases, and diseases that influence the reproductive function are more frequent in girls than in young men.

During the last five years government and specialists paid much attention to the problems of adolescent’s sexual and reproductive health. Governmental Program “Youth People of Belarus” regulates creation of services of consultative assistance to adolescents and young people on issues of protection of reproductive health, including family planning, desired childbirth, prevention of STD’s, including HIV/ AIDS. In many polyclinics special receptions (cabinets) are set up by children’s and teenager’s gynaecologists, which undergo special training to work with teenagers. Within the UNFPA Project “RH information and services for teenagers and youth” the Ministry of Health developed both training programme and manual on adolescents’ reproductive health counselling for medical professionals and different informational materials on RH issues. Due to the work on prevention of unwanted pregnancy the number of teenage pregnancies reduces every year. But annually up to 8 – 10% of all abortions are

performed to adolescents (15 – 19 years) and among who give birth 11 – 13% are young women up to 19 years.

Dynamics of teenage pregnancy in Belarus are listed in the table below:

	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002
Teenage pregnancy (teenage births + teenage abortions per 1000 girls of 15 – 19 age)	75,3	73,0	67,6	54,0	43,9
Including teenage births (per 1000 girls of 15 – 19 age)	42,8	36,0	30,9	27,5	23,3
Including teenage abortions (per 1000 girls of 15 – 19 age)	32,5	37,0	36,7	26,5	20,6

Another important problem of reproductive health is sexually transmitted diseases (STD). Adolescent girls are biologically more vulnerable to STDs, including HIV than adults as their not formed reproductive system is less protected from infections. Due to the inequality of sexes adolescent girls more often become victims of high-risk sexual contacts as a result of pressure from their equals and especially adult men. STDs are more often in young people of 15 – 24 years – up to 75% of total STDs.

In spite of stabilisation and reduction of syphilis and gonorrhoea incidence the situation with STDs in Belarus remains extraordinary as the incidence is rather high and exceeds that in the developed countries in dozens times. Extremely alarming is the fact that among adolescents infected with syphilis (up to 19 years) 84.8% are girls.

Dynamics of syphilis incidence in Belarus are listed in the table below:

	1995	1997	1999	2001	2002
All population (per 100 000)	148,9	199,1	130,5	80,5	58,8
Including adolescents of 15-19 age (per 100 000 of this age)	337,4	372,3	206,2	103,1	72,6
Including boys of 15 – 19 age (per 100 000 boys of this age)	157,0	186,7	100,3	64,5	37,6
Including girls of 15 – 19 age (per 100 000 girls of this age)	521,7	562,9	317,1	143,2	108,7

The above-mentioned activities; the “Conception of Health Care Development in the Republic of Belarus”, approved by the Government of the Republic of Belarus in 1998; the results achieved by mother and child health care service and reproductive health due to implementation the Plan of Actions of ICPD, in close cooperation with practical health care and scientific potential of the country; cooperation with the international organisations (WHO, UNDP, UNICEF, etc.) as well as WHO targets on Health for All in the 21st century (target 3 “Healthy start in life”, target 4 “Health of young people”, target

7 “Reducing communicable diseases” and target 15 “An integrated health sector”) enabled us to set the tasks for future. The following targets on reproductive health care, promotion of women, adolescents and children health for 2004 and the following years, first of all on the further development of public health:

I. Improvement of quality of health of adolescents and young people:

- Further development of “friendly” services on sexual and reproductive health for adolescents and youth;
- Moral and sexual upbringing of adolescents, promotion of safe and responsible behaviour;
- Prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections;
- Reduction of unplanned pregnancies in adolescents, provision of contraception appropriate to age and status;
- Treatment and health promotion activities with adolescents and young women with chronic diseases to prepare for planned pregnancies;
- Further training for physicians for adolescents, medical staff of higher medical education institutions and medical schools, therapists on the issues of reproductive health care for adolescents and youth;

II. Family planning

- Establishment and development of family planning centres in all regions;
- Training of the family planning centres’ staff on counselling and contraception methods;
- Involvement of men in family planning issues and process of protection of sexual and reproductive health;
- Reduction of unplanned pregnancies and abortions, especially in women of active reproductive age;
- Preparation of methodological and training materials on issues of reproductive health and family planning, and preparation of information materials on family planning and reproductive health for different age and target groups.

We hope that while fulfilling the set tasks Belarus specialists will find understanding and support of their foreign colleagues and partners who have achieved significant successes in public health, including promotion of reproductive health.

Zinaida A. Sevkovskaia,
Specialist of Reproductive Health Department
of Scientific Research Institute
for Mother&Child Care of Republic of Belarus
ul. Nikiforova 35 – 80
220141 Minsk, Belarus
E-mail: sevkov@mail.ru