

## PANORAMA PEOPLE

### INTERVIEW

*With Minister of Health of the Russian Federation  
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**1. Like many other countries in the WHO European Region, the Russian Federation is facing an epidemic of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). What in your opinion are the main successes and problems in this area for the Russian Federation? What are the priority areas for combating NCDs in your country?**

Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are the leading cause of death in Russia and around the world. This is why it is no coincidence that combating NCDs is one of the top priorities for the Russian Federation in both its foreign and domestic policies.

The main effect in terms of reducing the burden of NCDs is achieved through the implementation of a comprehensive range of measures, which involve two main areas – prevention (at the level of the individual and the population as a whole) and treatment.

Combating controllable risk factors requires an integrated approach, both at the legislative and the individual levels. In recent years, we have adopted a number of legislative measures to reduce the burden of tobacco and alcohol, and large-scale communication campaigns have been launched. This, of course, requires an intersectoral approach, the combined efforts of state and public institutions and the participation of every single person – promoting a responsible attitude to one's health.

We started active work on the development of individual preventive approaches in 2013 with the launch of mass health screenings – the reintroduction of the standard health assessment programme. Preventive examinations and standard health assessments were carried out on 48.5 million people in 2017, which is 1.5 times higher than in 2013. The plan is to increase this figure to 80 million by 2021, and over 100 million by 2024.

The comprehensive nature of the measures we have adopted has allowed us to achieve impressive results in a short space of time. As of the end of 2017, the average life expectancy in our country stood at 72.7 years, which is 2.5 years more than in 2012 and 5 years more than in 2007. In 2017, the mortality rate in the Russian Federation was the lowest it had been for 20 years, at 12.4 deaths per 1000 population. In the last year alone, we managed to reduce mortality from cardiovascular diseases by 5%, and by 3.5% for cancers.

The effectiveness of measures taken in Russia was noted by the World Health Organization when our country was recognized as a leader in the fight against NCDs.

Russian health care is currently facing a fundamental task, set by the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, to increase the average healthy lifespan of the population. To achieve this goal, we have developed a range of measures that have been integrated into the “Improving Public Health”

federal project as part of the “Demography” national project. The project is ambitious in its scope. As for preventive approaches for the population, I will mention just the following: by 2024, we plan to reduce alcohol sales by 9%.

## **2. The increased burden of cardiovascular and oncological illness has also affected Russia. What actions are being taken by the Government of the Russian Federation at the health-care system level to prevent and control these diseases?**

As I mentioned earlier, the prevention of diseases and arresting them at the early stages form the basis for effectively combating NCDs. Thanks to the widespread introduction of standard health assessments of the population, the detection rate of cardiovascular disease has increased significantly. In addition, health checks with doctors have led to an increase by 1.6 times of the number of people with arterial hypertension who are managing to control their blood pressure within the target range, while the number of hypercholesterolemia patients who have managed to reduce dangerously high cholesterol levels in their blood has increased by 3.5 times.

Of particular importance in the fight against cardiovascular disease is the response time of the medical services to acute conditions. We recently implemented a large-scale vascular programme in our country, the core of which was the creation of a network of specialized vascular centres offering all forms of modern treatment in acute vascular pathology. More than 600 such centres are already operating across the country. As a result, mortality rates from diseases of the circulatory system have dropped by 22% over the past six years. The vascular centres are set to be upgraded in the near future.

As part of our “Health Care” national project, we set the task of reducing mortality from diseases of the circulatory system by another 23.4% by 2024.

As for the health-care system’s fight against oncological diseases, in recent years, active oncological screening during standard health assessments has helped detect approximately 56% of all Stage 1 and Stage 2 malignant neoplasms among the Russian population. As a result, the five-year survival rate increased to 54%, and mortality from oncological diseases dropped by 1.8% in 2017.

A programme is currently being elaborated in Russia to combat oncological diseases. Thus, a number of measures dedicated to the fight against cancer have been developed as part of the “Health Care” national project I mentioned earlier.

Essential to these measures is the establishment of vigilance in the identification of oncological diseases, as part of which doctors working in clinics can receive special training. A programme has also been developed for medical workers to test their qualifications. At present, 80% of therapists have already undergone such training.

The next issue is the creation of outpatient oncological services which, in the event that cancer is suspected, should carry out a full examination of the patient within 14 days and establish a diagnosis in accordance with the international code. We have set the task of creating a system in which the patient will, immediately upon receiving a cancer diagnosis, be referred to the cancer centre where he or she will receive medical assistance in accordance with the clinical protocol.

By 2024, we need to reduce mortality from neoplasms by 7.8% and the one-year mortality rate by 23%. We also need to increase the five-year survival rate by 11.3% and raise the detection rate of malignant neoplasms in the early stages to 63%.

## **3. The Russian Federation has achieved great results in the fight against tobacco. What has been the key to this success? And what can other countries take from Russia’s experience in this area?**

Russia fully shares the key goals and ideas of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and actively promotes their implementation.

For a long time, our country had one of the highest rates of smoking. This is what prompted us to take urgent measures. In 2010, we approved the national anti-tobacco concept, which established the main areas for the developing the fight against tobacco use in Russia, including: increasing prices and excise duties on tobacco; amending the tax policy; the full or partial ban on smoking in public places; educating the public; banning tobacco advertising; and reducing the number of harmful substances in cigarettes.

The primary measure taken in this area, which is celebrating its fifth anniversary this year, was the adoption in our country of the Law on Health Protection from Exposure to Environmental Tobacco Smoke and the Consequences of Tobacco Consumption. In Russia, the ban on smoking was first applied to public eating places and public transport. In addition, tobacco advertising was banned, and smoking warnings started to appear on television shows featuring scenes in which the characters could be seen smoking.

The main advantage of the law is its systemic nature, which made it possible to combine the norms of different areas of the law to a single complex of measures. The systemic work done in recent years has helped reduce tobacco consumption significantly – by 22% for adults and by 2.5 times for adolescents.

**4. Despite the fact that alcohol consumption among men in Russia is on the decline, the problem continues to be a very serious one for Russian society as a whole. How do the Government of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Health plan to deal with this problem?**

Alcohol is one of the most serious risk factors in the development of various diseases and premature death. In the past, we implemented a range of measures that helped reduce alcohol consumption in our country significantly, by almost 40%. This was made possible by limiting the times and conditions for the sale of alcohol, the lack of television advertising and the ban on drinking alcohol in public places.

Today, we have developed a number of legislative initiatives aimed at granting organizations the right to refuse to sell alcoholic products, including when providing public catering services, to persons who are in a state of intoxication; introducing the requirement to allocate special areas for alcoholic products, so that they are displayed separately from the other types of products and goods and cannot be seen directly by consumers; introducing a ban on the sale of alcoholic beverages that are over 16.5% proof by organizations providing public catering services at concerts and in theatres and parks; and introducing a complete ban on the sale of alcoholic products at sports venues.

In addition, there is a provision that gives municipal authorities the right to completely ban the sale of alcoholic products in their territories.

**5. The Russian Federation hosted the FIFA World Cup this year. Do you think that holding such an important international sporting event will help popularize physical activity among the Russian population? What measures are taken in the Russian Federation as a whole to support leading a healthy lifestyle?**

The World Cup is a grand sporting event loved by everyone. Over the course of a month, the best footballers on the planet showed off their skills at stadiums across our country. This was, of course, a great challenge for us.

We provided 6500 medical workers for the tournament, and we developed a medical support system with a response time of up to five minutes.

Our efforts did not go unnoticed by the FIFA medical service, and we are currently in the process of passing on our experience to the hosts of the next tournament.

Returning to the issue of the World Cup's contribution to promoting a healthy lifestyle, I would like to note that in recent years we have observed a growth in the number of people who take part in sports on a regular basis, with that number rising to 34% of the population in 2017 alone. Of course, the recent sporting event, and the impressive performance of our national team at the tournament, will further encourage people to lead a more active lifestyle.

In addition, we are working on additional measures to get people to lead a healthy lifestyle, including healthy eating and giving up harmful habits. And we hope to significantly increase the number of people in Russia who are dedicated to leading a healthy lifestyle by 2024.

**6. What contribution does the Russian Federation make to the implementation of the global agenda for the prevention and control of NCDs?**

In 2011, Russia was entrusted with holding the First Global Ministerial Conference on Healthy Lifestyles and Noncommunicable Disease Control, which was the starting-point for the global process of mobilizing and uniting efforts in the fight against NCDs, supported by heads of state through the adoption of a resolution on the issue at a Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly. A strategy for preventing NCDs was determined in accordance with the Political Declaration, forming the basis of national health care development programmes.

In 2012, we launched an initiative on the creation of a global mechanism for the fight against NCDs together with a number of partner countries, which became the basis for the establishment of the United Nations Interagency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of NCDs, which operates under the auspices of WHO and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

As you know, this Task Force coordinated the activities of organizations that are members of the United Nations and other international organizations and its main goal is to

strengthen comprehensive aid to Member States in their efforts to prevent and control NCDs and limit their consequences.

At the same time, Russia has been consistently financing WHO projects related to the problem of NCDs since 2012.

The first of these was the global project to develop and implement national strategies for the prevention and control of NCDs in 24 countries, which has made it possible to pay greater substantive attention to NCD-related problems in each of the countries.

The WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of NCDs was opened in conjunction with the WHO Regional Office for Europe in 2014.

In addition, Russia plays an active role in the work of the Task Force, and we support it at the expert level and in terms of financing: in 2017, we financed a joint WHO–UNDP project aimed at helping countries prepare investment feasibility studies for the purposes of enhancing national intersectoral activities to fight NCDs in a number of countries in different WHO regions.

**7. The WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of NCDs is located in Moscow and is funded by the Government of the Russian Federation. Why was it important for the country to support the establishment of this centre here?**

As I already mentioned, in 2011 Russia identified the priority work that must be done in the fight against NCDs, for a number of internal and external reasons. Soon after that, our country became the main donor in the financing of project activities in this area.

In September 2014, the Government of the Russian Federation adopted the decision to open the NCD Office in Moscow and allocate financial resources in the amount of over US\$20 million for the five years of its operation. The main task of the NCD Office is to provide support to the 53 countries in the WHO European Region, with a focus on countries where the NCD burden is particularly high.

In its work, the NCD Office is guided by innovative approaches and develops best practices and effective tools for combating NCDs in Russia, through which the main diseases of the 21st century are being tackled in Europe and, later, throughout the world.

Over the course of its work, the NCD Office has demonstrated its effectiveness in assisting a number of countries to assess the activities of their health-care systems in conditions of a high NCD burden, and in developing strategies for combating these diseases. It has also carried out research into and consulted on issues related to healthy diet and physical activity and organized a number of training seminars for managers in the health-care system and other sectors in order to strengthen interdepartmental cooperation on health care and prevention of NCDs.

A great advantage of the activities of an office like this one is that it actively involves both international and Russian experts from leading research institutes in its work, which facilitates the exchange of experience and the continued application of the best practices inside the country.

What is more, we should note here that, according to the draft report of the United Nations General Assembly on noncommunicable diseases in eastern Europe and central Asia, there has been a noticeable trend towards reducing the burden of noncommunicable diseases in these regions, which is largely due to the work of the NCD Office in Moscow.

The Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation is currently working with a number of agencies on the issue of continuing financial support for the activities of the NCD Office in Moscow. In addition, the activities of the Interagency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of NCDs is expected to be included in this work. This will make it possible to use approaches that have been tested in the European Region that have proven to be effective in the other five WHO regions.

**8. As we are a fully bilingual English–Russian magazine, we have to ask about the Russian Federation’s support for multilingualism within the framework of WHO. At this year’s World Health Assembly, the Russian Federation sponsored a resolution on multilingualism that calls for equal respect for all official languages. Why is it so important for the Government of the Russian Federation to support multilingualism within the framework of WHO as a whole and to ensure the availability of WHO materials in Russian in particular? What else can the WHO and Member States do to ensure a greater balance in the use of its official languages?**

Russian is one of the six official languages of the United Nations and WHO, and the principle of multilingualism is enshrined in the charters of these organizations. However, less than 10% of the WHO’s English-language materials have been translated

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into Russian. Given this fact, there is often a need for an official translation of WHO documents into Russian so that experts can provide official interpretation of international norms, standards and approaches to the resolution of various health-care issues when formulating and implementing country strategies, as well as in the development of science.

This is why, in 2012–2014, we implemented a project in conjunction with the WHO entitled “Improving the Quality and Quantity of Translations of WHO Information into Russian”, the purpose of which was to translate, publish and disseminate WHO materials in various formats (print, electronic, online) in Russian. As a result, a large number of Russian language materials from the WHO were distributed across the health-care departments in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, as well as among federal research centres and medical universities.

Of course, the response was fantastic. We received letters of gratitude for printing the materials in Russian, as well as requests for other WHO publications to be translated and distributed. For the first time in 25 years, many of the scientific research centres and medical universities in Russia and the former Soviet countries had free access to WHO publications in the Russian language.

I am confident that this will make modern WHO materials more accessible to Russian audiences and will therefore help preserve the health of Russian citizens. ■