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Latest TB Statistics Inspire Optimism

By Alexander Winning

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Russia's efforts to control the spread of tuberculosis may be yielding results.

The number of TB-infected people declined significantly last year, health experts announced Thursday.

At a news conference dedicated to World TB Day, speakers struck a positive note, citing data that point to a more than 5 percent decline in newly detected TB cases in 2011 compared with the previous year.

Over the same period, the TB mortality rate fell from 15.3 deaths to 13.9 deaths per 100,000 people.

2011 is only the third year since 2003 that a declining infection rate has been recorded, leading some experts to say the tide is turning in the effort to decrease domestic prevalence.

Last year's results are an "important achievement" that reflect a "persistent trend," said

Lyudmila Mikhailova, deputy director of the Health and Social Development Ministry's department for prophylaxis and medical support.

But despite the cautious optimism at the event, which carried the slogan "our generation should stop TB," experts acknowledged that Russia remains among the top 22 countries in the world by cases of TB infection.

In 2011, there were about 105,000 new cases of TB in Russia, leading to just over 20,000 deaths, according to federal data.

By comparison, there were roughly 110,000 cases of infection and close to 22,000 fatalities in 2010.

Although the overall number of TB cases is falling, the number of cases involving multidrug-resistant TB and combined cases of HIV/AIDS and TB rose last year by 7.6 percent and 1.9 percent, respectively, Mikhailova said.

Among the most vulnerable to the airborne disease are prison inmates, said Sergei Baryshev, medical director for the Russian penitentiary system.

As many as 35,000 of the country's inmates have been diagnosed with TB, and 20 percent carry multidrug-resistant forms, he said.

In addition, infection rates in the country's Siberian and far eastern regions are almost double the national average, chief sanitary doctor Gennady Onishchenko wrote in a packet distributed to reporters.

Several measures to sustain the success of eradication efforts were suggested at the conference. They included optimizing diagnostic techniques and improving coverage of medical institutions specializing in TB treatment.

"It is better to diagnose and warn than treat and save [lives]," Mikhailova said.

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