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Mayor to Investigate Cancer Suicide Spate

By Yekaterina Gladkova

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A recent string of suicides in Moscow among people living with cancer will be thoroughly investigated, the Moscow Mayor's Office said Tuesday.

More than 10 cancer patients have committed suicide in Moscow since the beginning of the month, according to RIA Novosti.

"We are looking into these suicides, I have ordered them to be looked into one more time," Leonid Pechatnikov, deputy mayor for social issues, was quoted as saying by the news agency.

Pechatnikov said that "the vast majority [of suicides] had nothing to do with cancer patients."

The issue of cancer patients taking their own lives in Russia dominated the headlines a year ago, when former Rear Admiral Vyacheslav Apanasenko shot himself, having left behind a note that blamed his suicide on his inability to obtain painkillers. His death was also one in a

series of suicides among cancer patients, prompting widespread public concern over the country's system of treatment and support for cancer patients and their access to drugs.

At the time, Pechatnikov said that that wave of suicides was "an aggravation of psychiatric disorders" caused by the changeable spring weather.

In the wake of last year's suicides and extensive media coverage, the authorities moved to ease the procedure of obtaining medication for cancer patients. In December last year, the State Duma amended the law to extend the validity of prescriptions from five to 15 days and broaden the list of places licensed to dispense such drugs. But the law only comes into force this summer, and Noviye Izvestia newspaper reported Tuesday that the most common complaint among cancer patients was still that they could not obtain painkillers when they need them.

"Every year, 500,000 people are diagnosed with cancer in Russia and 90 percent of them are depressed," Olga Goldman, head of a counseling service for cancer patients and their relatives, told Noviye Izvestia.

"Sometimes patients have no relatives, or they live far away, or they themselves live in a small town or village; then the chances of them having a good quality of life despite the diagnosis are next to zero. That's why many of them opt for suicide," she told the newspaper.

Goldman said that access to painkillers remained a problem.

"Patients and their relatives have to beg for help to which they are entitled by law," she was cited as saying.

The situation is also exacerbated by funding cuts, doctors say. Federal budget expenses on specialized care, including cancer treatment, dwindled from 161 billion rubles ($2.6 billion at the current exchange rate) in 2012 to 72 billion in 2015, Mikhail Dronov, chairman of the executive committee of the Movement Against Cancer, was quoted by the Lenta.ru news website as saying last week.

Doctors say the problem is not only agonizing for the patients themselves, but also demoralizing for those treating them.

"How do you think a doctor feels when he realizes he has 20 patients and the quota for the medication recipients is two?" Georgy Manikhas, head of the St. Petersburg oncology department, was cited by Lenta.ru as saying.

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