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FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

UZBEKISTAN

FIRST PERSON

Trust and Sympathy for Successful Care

After USAID training for TB nurses, Asya became a confidant and teacher for her patients.



Photo: Quality Health Care Project

Asya, left, shares information with her patient.

“I had good teachers in my life, and now I’m teaching my colleagues to understand our patients. For that we only need to put ourselves in their place.”

—Asya

In her early life, Asya Butahodzhaeva was the pupil. Born and raised in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Asya studied, graduated from medical school and, after working in a psychiatric hospital for a few years, she started working as a nurse in the capital’s first TB hospital in the 1970s. A natural-born optimist and people-person, Asya enjoyed working with patients, although most nurses in Uzbekistan then were little more than doctors’ administrative assistants: they handed out medications and even sometimes did janitorial work but were rarely involved in direct patient care.

During her first years as a nurse, Asya continued to learn on the job. “The main thing I learned [from the doctors] is that we need to express sympathy with patients and understand the problems of the patients.” For Asya, this lesson was simple enough: her life motto was always “treat others as you want them to treat you.” But while sympathy came easily to her, Asya didn’t always feel confident in her technical knowledge and communication skills. “In the past I didn’t talk with our patients about TB and if they asked any questions I would always send them to a doctor for counseling because I wasn’t sure about my knowledge and also didn’t know how to explain properly.”

That changed in 2009 when Asya took part in a USAID program, implemented by Project Hope, to train TB nurses in counseling. Before the program’s implementation, studies found that patients who stopped treatment early often felt neglected in hospitals or simply did not understand the importance of finishing their treatment. Patients who end treatment early are not cured and could go on to spread TB to their community or develop a form of TB that is resistant to anti-TB drugs. Nurses, like Asya, were identified as the solution: a perfectly placed caregiver and counselor to whom patients could turn for support and answers.

For Asya, the training program enhanced her knowledge of TB and empowered her to become a confidant and teacher to her

patients. Since the training, her confidence has increased, and she is now able to tailor her counseling approach to her patients' different situations. When Asya works with women who have TB, she is careful to include the woman's family in her counseling sessions. She knows that if the woman's family does not understand the importance of finishing the treatment, they may pressure her to return home to take care of the family before she is cured. Thanks to Asya's efforts, as well as those of other nurses in Uzbekistan, many of whom are women, the number of patients stopping their TB treatment before it is completed has decreased in the last few years.

After 33 years as a nurse, Asya is now a teacher as well. In her hospital she says patients feel comfortable approaching her for help and, in the process, both nurses and patients have begun to trust each other. Asya has also become a teacher to her colleagues: when she has free time, she trains other nurses on interpersonal communication and counseling. The USAID Quality Health Care Project is expanding these successful activities to enable all health professionals, but especially women health professionals representing the vast majority of the primary health care workforce, to improve treatment, care, and support and also contribute to reducing stigma and discrimination through community action for health. For Asya, this is her time to educate others on the importance of building trust and feeling sympathy for patients to help them heal.