

The US and Russia: Confronting Common Challenges Strategic Collaboration on Health

On Tuesday, May 12, the Center for Strategic and International Studies hosted a panel of twelve leading Russian and American experts in global health policy to examine their respective nations' experiences in infectious disease surveillance, health systems reform, chronic disease prevention and management, and global health partnership and leadership. Co-chaired by Senator William Frist, former Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate and CSIS Trustee, and Dr. Nikolai Gerasimenko, First Vice Chair of the Russian Duma's Committee on Health Protection, the panel weighed new ideas for future Russian-US joint initiatives and generated considerable shared excitement. CSIS Senior Associate Judyth Twigg played the lead role in conceptualizing and coordinating the session. Approximately twenty additional experts on US-Russian collaboration on health, representing government, academia, and the private sector, contributed significantly to these discussions, which amounted to a brainstorming session for a blueprint for *strategic collaboration on health*.

These talks stressed health challenges common to Russia and the US, with a focus on *demographic change* and the urgent need for *health systems reform*.

- *Demographic change*: The US and Russia share the challenge of aging populations, with all that implies for the provision of health and social services to older Americans and Russians. Russia's problems are compounded by alarmingly high middle-aged male mortality and birth rates too low to sustain the current size of the population. Demographic regression, the Russian delegates emphasized, remains the top health challenge for Russia. Collaborative efforts to encourage healthier lifestyles hold the potential for multigenerational benefit for both societies.
- *Health systems reform*: Both countries struggle to balance the competing imperatives of high quality, equity in access and affordability, and containment of health care costs. Russia and the United States are each in the midst of historic efforts to reform their health systems, bring about greater efficiencies in complex federal forms of government, and produce better health outcomes as a return on substantial investments. Both face key questions: who pays, how providers should be reimbursed, what institutional structures can deliver services most efficiently and effectively, and how new technologies can best be harnessed. Collaborative discussions in this area hold the potential for innovative solutions to common problems.

There was a strong sentiment among the participants on May 12 that cooperation in the health sector can enhance the promising strategic reengagement currently under way between Russia and the United States. The panel stressed that joint activities in this arena can and should demonstrate tangible value to broad public constituencies in both countries. Another important thread underlying the discussion was the sense that collaboration on health can serve as a model

to help move the US-Russian interaction beyond the donor-recipient paradigm to a new relationship based on genuine partnership. New and innovative health partnership activities could highlight the fact that both the US and Russia are federal systems, with significant potential for productive partnerships between individual states and localities with key responsibility for provision of health services. A focus on the state and local levels would also highlight alarming geographic disparities in health status shared by both countries.

The discussion generated a series of proposals for focused, collaborative work, including:

- Measures to lower health risks associated with tobacco and alcohol use, especially among young people, including public education strategies and coordinated international efforts. Efforts here could include a significant research component, so that actions are evidence-based, and should focus on cost-effective prevention of disease.
- Continuing dialogue on enhanced surveillance systems and improvements in data use to facilitate the improved management of infectious and chronic disease. The development of capacity for standardized data reporting could be an important first step in this area.
- An annual U.S.-Russia forum on reform of national health systems, with a special focus on financing, cost controls, and evaluation mechanisms. An annual forum would have the flexibility to broaden participation to other interested countries, and could highlight joint exploration of innovative approaches such as e-health and electronic medical records.
- Expansion of existing successful research, institutional twinning, and professional exchange programs to include an increased focus on emerging issues such as challenges in health care reform and chronic disease prevention and management. Significant progress in several areas -- reproductive health, perinatology, HIV/AIDS -- is already underway, with a combination of public and private support. Both official and non-governmental entities have essential contributions to make to these efforts.

The United States and Russia share great strengths across all elements of their health sectors. During the Cold War, Russia and the United States jointly pioneered new vaccine technologies for use in global smallpox and polio campaigns, and over the decades Russia and the United States have developed extensive legislative, scientific and research exchanges. These efforts have provided important foundations for current and future collaborations. Even today, no other two countries can boast their levels of historic achievement in scientific research and delivery of life-saving health interventions to communities around the world. Together, with appropriate institutional mechanisms in place to provide a forum for joint work, mutual collaboration on health can contribute significantly to the evolution of healthier, safer populations in both countries.