Impact Story

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TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND SERVICES / TAPAS

"For Ukrainians, cancer treatment is very expensive. However, patients can receive many things free of charge, thanks to the Get Treated chatbot."

How a Telegram chatbot helps patients save tens of thousands of hryvnia fighting breast cancer and uphold their rights to free medical care.

Since 2014, Olena has taken turns battling her own cancer and that of two loved ones. Today, two of them—she and her mother—are recovering. Recently, Olena learned about Get Treated (@likuysia_bot), a Telegram messenger bot that helps her find information about the medical examinations she needs and the state-provided services and medications available to her free of charge.

How Olena fought cancer for herself and her family

In 2014, Olena was diagnosed with intestinal cancer. She underwent four surgeries and chemotherapy. Chemotherapy alone cost more than her monthly salary yet was just one of many medical expenses she faced. Family and friends helped her with money.

Soon thereafter, Olena learned that her nephew, too, had cancer. That was when she discovered Athena: Women Against Cancer, an NGO that provides information about treatment options and free offerings to people with cancer across Ukraine.

Unfortunately, Olena's nephew did not survive. But when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, Olena went to Viktoria Romaniuk, co-founder

of Athena, for information. That was how she found out about the Get Treated chatbot.

How open data helps save more lives

Get Treated operates in Telegram and Viber. The chatbot originated as part of OpenDataGo, a contest held by the USAID/UK aid-funded Transparency and Accountability in Public Administration and Services / TAPAS Activity in partnership with the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine. OpenDataGo supports open government data-based projects created by civil society organizations in Ukraine.

Get Treated is geared toward patients with breast cancer, the most prevalent form of cancer both worldwide and in Ukraine. Liki Control, an organization that raises awareness about affordable healthcare options, created the chatbot with Athena.

Liki Control founder Natalia Guran, who worked in the IT sector for much of her life, decided to take advantage of her knowledge and experience to help people with health issues. Athena co-founder Viktoria Romaniuk herself fought breast cancer in the past and now actively works to expand the list of free services and medications available to cancer patients. Together, they make a powerful team.

"While a human rights activist can help one patient defend their rights at a time, a service like Get Treated helps thousands at every stage," says Natalia Guran. According to Natalia, some Ukrainians diagnosed with cancer simply retreat upon learning the news, refusing life-saving treatment due to the high cost. "In the case of breast cancer, these are mostly women aged 35 to 45 who are able-bodied and have quite young children," Natalia continues. "It is a real tragedy. With Get Treated, we are trying to reverse this trend."

How Get Treated works

Get Treated contains a full roadmap for treating breast cancer, including information about free diagnostics and treatment available under the National Program of Medical Guarantees, all in a simple, yet comprehensive format. The chatbot retrieves this information from government-supplied open data, including the National Register of Public-Serving Healthcare Institutions[1], agreements between the National Health Service of Ukraine (NHSU) and cancer hospitals, and other sources.

Get Treated offers a list of preventive medical examinations and the institutions where patients can receive them; information about inpatient treatment admission conditions; and guidance about how and where to receive medications for free, even if they are unavailable in hospitals.

Furthermore, the service instructs users about how to defend their right to medical aid, prevent corruption at medical institutions, and combat illicit payment solicitations for services or medications that the NHSU lists as free.

There is also guidance on which tests to take and when. "Unfortunately, treatment without a sufficient number of tests is a common problem in Ukraine," says Viktoria.

For example, following her diagnosis, Olena's mother received neither a blood test nor an ultrasound. Her doctor prescribed treatment without a proper cardiac exam. She only later learned from other doctors that she needed to take these tests.

Now, women can receive correct and timely information about treatment protocols in the chatbot.

"It's a very cool roadmap for patients with breast cancer, and the best resource for those facing this diagnosis for the first time who don't know what to do," Olena says.

The chatbot's audience has already exceeded 5,600 users and continues to grow.

According to the Ukraine Health Index 2019 survey, 24.5 percent of Ukrainians decide against receiving cancer treatment because of the high cost. "But in fact, patients can receive many things free of charge. People simply don't know their rights," Viktoria explains. For example, computed tomography scans must be performed free of charge, yet patients may pay anywhere between 1,800 UAH (67 USD) and 5,000 UAH (186 USD) for a scan, depend-ing on the medical institution.

When doctors at a regional hospital saw Olena's mother, they asked her to pay out-of-pocket for the examinations themselves. They even solicited a bribe of 200 UAH (7.5 USD) to ensure that medical personnel would perform these procedures at all. Olena says that her mother, who wasn't aware of her rights, paid almost 4,000 UAH (150 USD) for her tests. "I realized that this is only the beginning, and if things are going to continue the way they have been, we won't have money to pay for the rest of my mom's treatment," Olena recalls.

Get Treated contains information about patients' rights and how to defend them. Thanks to this chatbot, Olena now knows what services can be received for free, and what medications are available for her mother. She even wrote a letter to the NHSU and eventually received a refund of the money she spent.

Olena is not going to give up. She is determined to keep fighting for her mother's health and safeguarding her own. With Get Treated, it's easier to do.

Meanwhile, Athena and Liki Control plan to continue developing the Get Treated chatbot. They also hope that with future financial support, they will be able to launch a similar chatbot for other forms of cancer, particularly lung cancer, which is the second most prevalent form in Ukraine.

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[1] Full name: The Register of Healthcare Institutions that have an Agreement with the NHSU on the Provision of Medical Services to the Public under the Law of Ukraine, "On Government Financial Guarantees of Medical Services to the Public."