Dr Alena Skrahina has been working in the field of respiratory medicine and tuberculosis (TB) in the Republican Scientific and Practical Centre for Pulmonology and TB (RRPCPTB), combining her clinical practice, research activity and administrative since 1986. As Deputy Director of RRPCPTB and Deputy National TB Program Manager since 2005, Dr Skrahina has been responsible for organizing and conducting clinical management of TB, M/XDR-TB, and HIV/TB patients, chairing the National M/XDR-TB Expert’s Board (Consilium), and managing the National TB Programme.

The End TB strategy identifies research as one of the key elements of the global tuberculosis (TB) response. The Global Strategy for TB Research and Innovation will soon be submitted for consideration and approval of the Member States at the 73rd session of the World Health Assembly. Would you please describe the importance of research for the National TB Programme (NTP)?

There is no forward movement without research and innovation in any area, not only in the fight against TB. Any new and more effective method of preventing, diagnosing and treating TB is ultimately the realization of research activities. Not only does participation in research projects bring the development of new and more effective methods (of preventing, diagnosing and treating TB), but it also creates conditions for their practical application, facilitating the development of new sets of skill among specialists.

How does TB research help shape the national policies and guidelines for fighting TB in Belarus? Does Belarus take the results of international research into account?

In fighting TB, Belarus aligns its policy mostly with the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO). WHO guidelines are based on published international research results (clinical studies, observational studies, operational studies, etc.), hence all evidence used in the decision-making processes of establishing those guidelines is provided by the system of global research. I am pleased to note that some of the results of studies conducted in Belarus, carried out separately or as part of international projects, constituted a part of the evidence base for formulating WHO recommendations and, consecutively, national recommendations. Thus, a complete cycle of international cooperation around the development, use and implementation of innovations has formed. And the effectiveness of those innovations has already been proven by existing evidence.

How flexible is Belarus’ NTP in terms of introducing innovations in TB prevention and treatment before these innovations are incorporated into the official WHO guidelines? What are the conditions for introducing such innovations?
Belarus can use new methods of diagnostics and treatment even before they are incorporated into the official WHO guidelines and the national guidelines, respectively, but only as part of research within national and international projects, thereby contributing to the implementation of innovations on the global level. Thanks to such projects, it is possible to witness the formation of the evidence base with respect to the effectiveness of such innovations at programme level. Only when these methods have been proven to be safe and effective and WHO has recommended them, can we begin to implement those methods in our programmes.

At the same time, in practice, the preliminary use of these methods in research significantly accelerates their introduction into country programme activities, because the staff has had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the features of the methods in question.

**What approach does Belarus use to determine TB research priorities? What research projects are granted priority support?**

When identifying which research projects to support, the NTP considers existing national and Regional priorities. In particular, in 2018 priority research areas for the Region were identified within the framework of the European Tuberculosis Research Initiative, with the participation of most countries of the WHO European Region. After an audit of the NTP and the epidemiological surveillance system, a list of priority research questions was identified. In order to obtain financial support from the state, any research project can be submitted for consideration to expert commissions under the Ministry of Health of Belarus. The commission considers such projects at several stages, and the support usually goes, according to experts, to the most promising, projects that take into account country and regional priorities. These could be studies on molecular and genetic research, immunology research, epidemiological research or clinical studies.

**Would you please describe your country’s TB research potential: who are the principal “suppliers” of evidence received through research and used in decision-making? What other interested parties are engaged in TB research?**

Belarus has tremendous research potential. We have the capability to carry out a broad range of research, from molecular to large-scale epidemiological studies. Since there are global and country level demands for evidence to be used in the process of decision-making, NTP organizes and directly participates in the research.

Among such projects the following can be noted: operational research on the introduction of optimized (non-injection) treatment regimens for drug-resistant TB; the role of surgical interventions in the treatment of TB; existing barriers to the provision of integrated services for HIV/TB. Belarus also participates in intercountry research projects, the results of which have repeatedly constituted the evidence base for the development of WHO recommendations and, accordingly, national recommendations.

We can say that in this process of research results implementation we have the participation of the whole hierarchy, from ordinary doctors to specialists of a national level, as well as employees of research institutes, representatives of non-governmental organizations and patient associations.

**What work is being carried out in Belarus to further strengthen its TB research potential?**

Belarus has maintained and strengthened its scientific and intellectual potential. The country has a developed system of training experts with the highest academic qualification. The state innovation development program is a strategic planning tool and a systematic mechanism for the implementation of the state innovation policy, which includes a set of measures for the development of the national innovation system. In addition, the country receives technical assistance from WHO in developing research capacity. In 2018–2019, WHO supported four applications from Belarus for the participation of its national specialists in structured training courses on conducting operational research, which significantly strengthened the NTP component for the analysis and use of data, including those collected in a planned manner by the TB surveillance system for management decisions.

**Disclaimer:** The interviewee alone is responsible for the views expressed in this publication and they do not necessarily represent the decisions or policies of the World Health Organization.