
Today, deadly infectious diseases are no longer a serious problem for the Soviets. As in the West, heart disease and cancer now rank as the leading causes of death. The Soviet Union provides free medical care to each and every one of its citizens, and it claims more than double the number of hospital beds per 10,000 people (115) and nearly twice as many doctors (some 850,000) as the United States. (And Soviet doctors still make house calls.) Moscow, Leningrad, and a few other major cities boast large medical research institutes. Americans and other foreigners sometimes travel to Soviet hospitals for special medical treatments. About 50 U.S. citizens have visited the Helmholtz Institute of Ophthalmology, which has pioneered treatment of retinitis pigmentosa, a hereditary disease that usually leads to blindness.

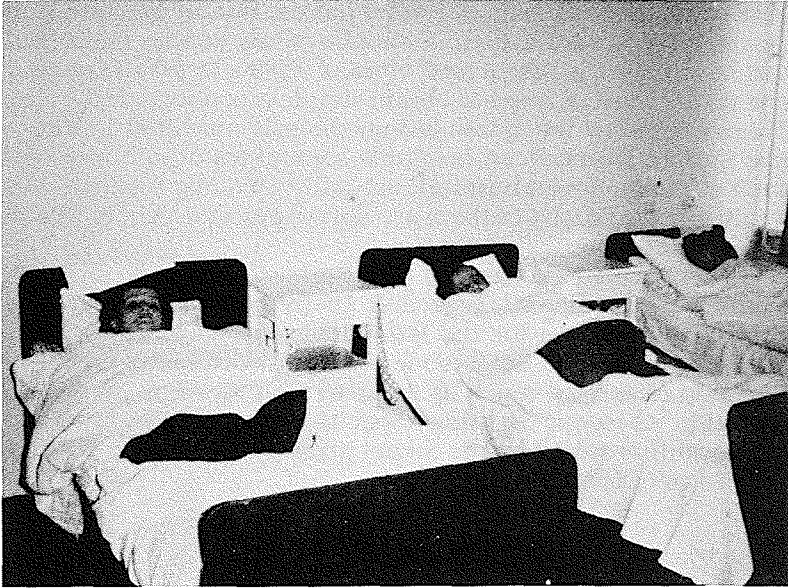
By the early 1970s, however, there were signs that something had gone awry. Moscow simply stopped publishing some kinds of medical data—presumably to avoid embarrassment. In fact, Murray Feshbach, a Georgetown University demographer, has shown that the 1970s dealt the Soviet Union unprecedented reversals in some vital health indicators. Alone among the world's industrialized nations, it experienced a rise in infant mortality. Indeed, death rates are up for all age groups. A Soviet male born in 1966 could expect to live 66 years; by 1979, male life expectancy at birth had dropped to 62, below that of Costa Rica (66.3), Syria (63.8), and Yugoslavia (65.4).

Not Enough Ammunition

Such setbacks probably reflect growing Soviet social problems more than they do defects in Soviet doctors or hospitals. Alcoholism, a diet high in cholesterol, and hypertension (a product of overcrowding and poor living conditions in Russian cities) contribute to heart disease. Poor diets increase the risk of cancer. Frequent abortions among Soviet women can lead to later complications during childbirth.

Yet the Soviet health care system is clearly in trouble. Between 1955 and 1977, the share of the Soviet gross national

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Soviet hospital wards frequently suffer overcrowding. In I. Grekova's novel A Ship of Widows (1983), a stroke patient is turned away by a doctor who says, "We cannot afford to keep incurables. We must account for every bed."

product (GNP) allotted to medical care dropped by more than one-fifth, to about two percent, even though outlays kept growing in absolute terms. Moscow's medical budget was \$28 billion in 1979. Meanwhile, the United States was struggling to hold down total public and private health care costs below \$212 billion, nine percent of the GNP.

Western medicine is a capital-intensive enterprise, dominated by CAT scanners, heart-lung respirators, and radioisotope machines. Soviet health care is, by contrast, labor-intensive. "Like the Red Army of an earlier era," notes Harvard University's Nick Eberstadt, "Soviet physicians assault the adversary in huge numbers, but without sufficient ammunition." (Also thrown into the battle are 2.7 million nurses and *fel'dshers*, or paramedics.)

The quality of care varies widely—it is generally better in the cities than in the countryside, better in the Russian west than in the Asian east. But nowhere is it particularly good (except perhaps in the special facilities reserved for the Soviet elite). The Soviets offer far more hospital beds (3.2 million in a

land of 269 million) than any other nation. But, by Western standards, there is very little in Soviet hospitals besides beds. Medical equipment is scarce and often of 1940's or 50's vintage. It can take a week or more to obtain simple blood tests and x-rays. There are only a few dozen kidney dialysis machines in the entire nation. If American hospitals sometimes do too much for their patients, Soviet hospitals are guilty of doing too little. One might say that many of them are dormitories for people who do not feel well.

There is also a difference in the ethos of Soviet health care. In the West, medicine is regarded chiefly as an expression of humanitarian concern for the individual, and its quality reflects that emphasis. The Soviets view medical care as essential for the good of *society*, much as an army uses its medical corps to maintain its troops' fighting capacity. As an old Bolshevik slogan recently revived by the Soviet press puts it: "Your health is the property of the republic!"

Doctors as Technicians

The Soviet Ministry of Health Protection oversees the sprawling system of medical research institutes, hospitals, sanatoriums, polyclinics, and dispensaries from its Moscow headquarters. The Ministry pays doctors' salaries and is responsible for all health facilities, but city governments and factories foot the bill for construction costs within the vast "territorial" network that serves the general public. The smaller and far superior "closed" network runs by separate rules and is restricted to all but Communist Party officials, leading scientists, and other members of the elite. The military relies on its own doctors and hospitals.

For average folk—everybody from university professors to steelworkers—the neighborhood polyclinic is the center of medical care. Here one finds the general practitioners, dentists, and psychiatrists who serve as the Soviet equivalent of the "family doctor." (In the big cities, specialized dispensaries tend to expectant mothers, the mentally ill, and other distinctive groups.) In theory, there is one polyclinic manned by 20 general practitioners for every 40,000 people, housed in a storefront, a freestanding building, a factory, or sometimes even an ordinary apartment. Also in the polyclinic are pediatricians (one for every 800 children under 16) and part-time specialists. This is the "ground floor" of Soviet medicine, where Soviet citizens take their aches and pains, their migraine headaches and swollen ankles.