

Medicine In Russia

ROSEMARY GILL, '67

The history of Russian Medicine is a tale of terrific plagues and famines, of some brilliant achievements in a few centres and of utter inadequacy in the open country. For centuries Russian medicine was primitive folk-medicine—a combination of empirical knowledge and of magic rites and religious beliefs.

Until the nineteenth century in rural districts it was only the fertility of the populace which triumphed over the typhus, small-pox and plague epidemics, and provided new lives to replace the corpses.

In the cities where the court was held, real physicians were brought in from the other European countries—England, Holland, Germany. Peter the Great made strong efforts to organize the Russian system—clinics, hospitals and medical schools were established—but upon his death most of them decayed. Catharine II was the next monarch to attempt reform in the medical field. An extensive welfare program was initiated, medical institutions were restored and new ones built. Vaccination was in its embryonic stages and although an attempt was made to institute this practice, the number of physicians was very scant and there was no organization capable of applying hygienic measures to any large extent.

During the nineteenth century, however, the bourgeoisie recognized that a sick proletariat was a serious menace to its own health, and definite, if not entirely adequate, steps were taken to alleviate the situation to some extent. Medical stations were established in each region of the country although this meant sometimes there was only one physician for every twenty-five thousand inhabitants, it did bring medical care to people who had never seen a doctor before.

With the advent of the Bolshevik Revolution this medical system was simply incorporated into the Communist regime—in fact it was almost a precursor of the present form. It created a medical organization, a network of medical stations all over the country that could be improved and increased in number—expanded in the Soviet plan.

The most striking feature of soviet medicine lies in the fact that it is available to all and is free of direct charge. Great emphasis has been placed on preventive medicine—"environmental epidemiology"—which seeks to determine what environmental factors, including climate and vegetation, increase the incidence of disease. Epidemics are no longer a problem. Extensive health measures, prophylaxis, more numerous and improved medical institutions and services, combined with the general rise in living standards have all increased the life span of the general population to about 70 years.

Inherent in this 'boom' of medical aid however, was the supercedence of quantity rather than quality. The emphasis was placed on more for everyone and up until the past four years the quality of medical education limped sadly behind the bulk of graduates. Medical schools were not in association with universities and there was a divorce between research institutes and the educational facilities resulting in little cross-fertilization and inspiration of one by the other. The two are now drawing closer together and the results of their researches are providing new basis for diagnoses, treatment and prophylaxis especially in cardiovascular work.

In 1963 the Soviet budget assigned almost three million roubles for health services. In the past four years new hospitals with 72,000 beds were built in urban and rural areas of the Russian Federation bringing the total number of beds to over one million.

The commonest form of medical services are the out-patients departments and polyclinics. These are found in all areas of the Republic—700 new polyclinics just recently have been opened. These are big establishments offering treatment and carrying out prophylactic work, usually staffed by thirty to fifty doctors of all specialties. They are equipped with up-to-date services for treatment, diagnosis, laboratories, X-ray rooms, and have special facilities for treatment of cardio-vascular, endocrinological and urological diseases and traumas. New stomatological polyclinics and 300 dental departments have been opened in Russian cities. Daily these clinics treat approximately 1.5 million people.

Due to the Soviet Government's stand on Freud's work, there is little Freudian psychoanalysis. However psychotherapy with study of the patient's background, personality, environmental and emotional stresses is quite prevalent. The use of drugs, hypnosis, group therapy and insulin shock forms the bulwark of psychiatric therapeutics. Until 1959, there was comparatively little use of electric shock as a method of treatment. The mental hospitals themselves are very well staffed—a nurse for every four patients and a doctor for every fifteen.

A unique development in the field of child care is the forest schools and boarding houses for children suffering from rheumatism and disturbance of the motor apparatus. These schools, usually situated in the suburbs in pleasant surroundings give the young patients an extended period of treatment, rehabilitation and education, the whole expense of which is borne by the state.

Another well developed facet of Russian medicine is the well equipped first aid units which are on instant alert throughout the country.

Treatment of a patient begins the minute the ambulance doctor reaches his side. In Moscow, special anti-infarction ambulances carry artificial lungs, cardio-stimulators, blood-substitute transfusion installations, portable blood test lab, a wide selection of drugs and everything a doctor needs in the way of anesthetizing equipment. Emergency Red Cross planes fly to outlying areas on call, and are equipped to perform operations on the spot.

Abortion in the Soviet Union was finally legalized in 1955 as an attempt to prevent the alarmingly high death rates from clandestinely and inefficiently performed "operations". The state however, does not enthusiastically endorse this measure and there is much emphasis placed on the dignity and importance of motherhood. Soviet law protects the labour of women. Expectant mothers receive apart from their annual leave, a maternity leave with full pay for 112 days. In case of a difficult confinement or in case of twins, or larger multiple births, the leave is extended. At the beginning of 1963 there were 226,000 beds in the medical institutions for expectant mothers and women in childbirth. There were 18,000 women and children consultation centres in the country, almost three times as many as in 1940.

Contraceptives are available to all physicians and pharmacies and instruction and education is freely given.

Last year the natural increase in population in the USSR was 15 people per 1,000 as compared with 6.5 in Britain and 6.0 in France.

The USSR has 49 medical educational and 74 research institutes staffed by over 15,000 scientific workers. In 1958, the medical institutes enrolled 14,950 men and women and this year the student body increased to 21,625. The medical education is free, the student is given a monthly stipend of about \$75.00 which is just adequate for living expenses. On attaining honors standing this is increased to \$125.00. The medical course averages five years. At the end of this time the young doctor is required to spend three years at a post chosen by the state—the top students may be permitted to choose their posts. They are encouraged to go to the far-flung areas and to the north—there is an additional raise in salary if such an area is chosen. The general salary is determined by the degree of experience and responsibility of the physician, and by the general economy of the country. However, doctors and engineers are among the highest paid professionals—ranking with ballerinas and successful writers.

The doctor is essentially a civil servant, depending solely on the state for employment. Private practice has become virtually obsolete.

The code of Medical ethics reads slightly differently from that in the West.—“Medicine is no longer a trade but a public function of the state; therefore the welfare of the individual is subordinate to the common welfare, or rather, the two are identical. The Soviet physician will not reveal the secrets of a patient . . . but, he will not hesitate to divulge secrets if the interest of society requires it. He will co-operate with his fellow doctors but he will not shield their mistakes if they are a menace to society.”

Although there is a wide disparity between the ideology of the Communist and the Western world it seems that in some quarters at least, a unifying factor is emerging in the attitude toward the medical profession and medicine in general. It will be interesting to observe the effects and repercussions this ‘unity’ will have on the future practice of medicine.

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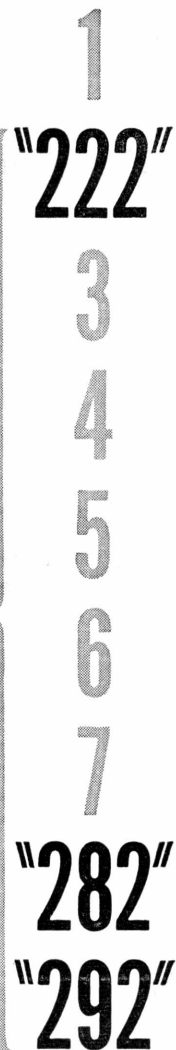
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