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HEALTH CARE IN THE SOVIET UNION

"No Westerner, reading this book, will ever choose the Soviet Union as a place to have more than the sniffles." That's the conclusion of an article in the September 4 Science, the magazine of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

The book referred to is "Inside Russian Medicine" by William Knaus, co-director of the intensive care unit at George Washington University, who spent a year in the Soviet Union as staff physician to a traveling U.S. Information Agency exhibit. The Science article was based also on an analysis of Soviet statistics by two of the world's leading experts on Soviet health.

The Science article documents the alarming rise of infant mortality since the mid-1960s, now more than double the U.S. rate even though the Russians don't count deaths that occur within the first week after birth. The most likely causes of the high rate of infant mortality are "repeated abortions (the average Soviet woman has six during her reproductive span); environmental pollution, which may cause genetic defects and miscarriages; poor management of childhood influenza (linked to malnutrition), which often turns to fatal pneumonia; and alcoholism."

Dr. Knaus said that, from his personal observations about Soviet health, "not only is much of it shockingly inadequate by American standards, both in quality of care and the availability of supplies and equipment, but, a large portion of what would in America be regarded as routine services are obtainable only through blat, or the connections, favors, and bribes that pervade transactions in the U.S.S.R. and that are necessary to get almost anything done well, on time, or indeed at all." He reported that "hospitalized patients often have to pay nurses for such things as bedpans, fresh sheets, prompt injections, and other rudiments of care."

The hygiene standards are horrifying. "Toilets can be few in number and filthy; hospital sheets are changed only once a week; people are rarely bathed. Postoperative infection and hospital-spread diseases are common." No importance is attached to the

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relief of pain.

Anyone who has lived in the Soviet Union for a year or more can corroborate all this. I once spent an evening with a couple who had spent several years inside Russia; he was a military attache at the Soviet Embassy in Moscow. His wife, whom we shall call Jane because she did not want to be identified, talked about her experiences with medical care in the Soviet Union.

The official policy is that there are no germs in Russia, therefore there is no need to sterilize instruments, wash hands, provide clean bed linen, or take other sanitary precautions. She had one friend on whom a doctor performed surgery without washing his hands as he moved from operation to operation. She got a terrible infection and almost died; her bed linens were never changed in two and a half weeks.

Jane said that no anesthetics are used in the Soviet Union. She had a Russian friend whose 12-year-old daughter had a growth inside her mouth. The mother took the child to an out-patient clinic, held the child down while the doctor cut the inside of the mouth from the lip to the rear, removed the growth, and then sewed up the inside. No anesthetic was used. The child was then sent back to school to finish the day there.

Jane went with a Russian friend to visit her aunt in the hospital. After the aunt was located in a large and crowded ward, she was discovered to be dead in bed. When this was reported to the man in charge, he threw the aunt's blanket on another bed, picked up the dead aunt by her heels, and dragged her out of the ward and down the corridor to dispose of the body.

Abortions are free in the Soviet Union and all the women have abortions frequently. One of Jane's Russian friends would brag that she had had only three abortions, an unusually small number.

Jane said that the alcohol consumption is tremendous; Russians drink to escape from life. Since vodka is expensive, most Russians drink a cheap wine. Many times she saw the police simply pass by and leave a drunk lying in the street at 30° below zero. More often, the police pick up the drunks and, after several offenses, send them to populate the forced labor camps.

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