

sounding board



Emergency Medicine Afield: The Russian Federation

James Meade, M.D., FAAEP

I recently traveled in the Russian Federation on a tour with my college alumni. I visited the emergency department of the largest hospital in St. Petersburg, the Elizavetinsky, and met with the director of the hospital. There is no formal training in emergency medicine or any certification of emergency physicians in the Russian federation. Their physical plants suffer from severe lack of funds for equipment and salaries. As a result, the health of the population has deteriorated, with falling population, birth rate, and longevity.

On a previous visit with the International Cardiovascular Society, 10th International Congress in 1971, I visited several hospitals in Moscow. That was the first International Medical Meeting in the Soviet Union, headed by Dr. Denton Cooley of the Texas Heart Institute, and we saw what was the best of the best, with specialized hospitals for cardiovascular and orthopedics. They were clean, well maintained, with intelligent and energetic staffs (who were chain smokers, even on ward rounds).

In spite of that, I found the atmosphere so depressing that I cut my tour short and left early. On my last day, a new friend, a cardiologist, took me for a ride to the Lenin Hills overlooking the city of Moscow and said, "Of course, you must come back soon." I did not have the heart to tell him I would never come back to the Soviet Union.

However, times have changed over the past 36 years and the Soviet Union is gone, replaced by the Russian Federation. I recall walking across Red Square at midnight (at that time Moscow was the safest city in the world, as long as your papers were in order) and watching the changing of the guard at Lenin's tomb. I saw young blond men doing the "goose-step" as they were coming out of the east gate of the Kremlin and changing places with the guards at the door of the Mausoleum. Overhead, flood lit, waved the hammer and sickle flag. If someone had told me then that this would all self-destruct in 20 years, I would have said they were mad, this empire will stand for another hundred years.

Now, the red, white, and blue flag of the Russian Federation flies over the Kremlin, and the country is split between the

mass of people, who are poverty stricken, and a few plutocrats, who drive Porsche SUVs. The Lenin Hills are now the Sparrow Hills. Beggars, hucksters, and pickpockets are everywhere, something never seen in the Soviet Union. The average wage of a physician is comparable to US \$200-250 per month, which is not enough to live on. Here in the United States young people live with their parents by choice, in the Russian Federation by necessity. For instance, our guide was a 40-year old woman, who was a teacher, but working as a tour guide in the summer. Her husband was a major in the army. There were five wage earners in her extended family, one of which was a doctor. With their combined incomes, they were able to survive.

Since the 1970s medical care has severely deteriorated in the Russian Federation, in spite of the fact that the constitution guarantees free health care for all citizens, and Russia has more physicians and health care workers than any other country in the world. The population is dropping rapidly from a peak of 148 million to 142.3 million in 2006, due to falling birth rate. Male longevity is down to an average of 60 years. Actually, this has slightly improved from 55 years in 1994. This is mainly due to complications of alcoholism and violence. The Russians smoke as much as ever. The problem of heavy alcohol consumption has been recognized since 1998, but little has been accomplished to rectify the situation. President Gorbachev attempted to limit alcohol consumption, but this resulted in illegal consumption of anything with any kind of alcohol, with devastating health results. Today, there is no problem getting vodka, the most common Russian drink. Even drinks such as Absinth, which has been illegal in the United States^{1,2}, are available.

The most recent UN report states that Russia is "doing too little to reverse a critical decline in its population" and predicts that the population "could fall to 100,000,000."³

For comparison, the United States population is 303,000,000, with population growth at 1% and a birth rate of 2.1, while the Russian federation has a population of 142,000,000, with a -0.5% growth and a birth rate of 1.4. There are 15 deaths

	UNITED STATES	RUSSIAN FEDERATION
POPULATION	303,000,000	142,300,000
GROWTH	1%	-.05
DEATH RATE	8.3/1000	15/1000
INFANT MORTALITY	6.4/1000 births	15.1/1000 births
FERTILITY RATE	2.1	1.4
LONGEVITY MALE	77.1 Years	60.0 Years

Table 1. Decline in Russia's Population

per 1000 people, and infant mortality is 15.13/1000. Needless to say, the Russians have no problem with illegal immigration, since no one wants to move there (See table 1)⁴.

The birth rate is falling and is now 1.4, which is not enough to sustain population growth. The death rate is 15/1000, compared with 8.3/1000 in the United States.⁴ There are more abortions than live births, 1.6 million to 1.5 million. Former President Vladimir Putin has called the declining population "the most acute problem of contemporary Russia."² The governor of the province of Ulyanovsk gave everyone a day off in February for "Family Contact" to encourage more pregnancies.

Even worse is the problem of HIV/AIDS, which is the highest in the Western world in Russia and the Ukraine. This is primarily due to intravenous drug use, but heterosexual spread is increasing. Due to poverty, young women are forced into the sex trade, which masquerades as "dating services" or "marriage agencies" but are really brothels without walls run by criminals.

The office of the Consulate General for the United States in St. Petersburg currently warns that:

"Western medical care in St. Petersburg can be expensive and difficult to obtain. . . Some facilities offer quality services but many restrict services to normal business hours and to persons willing to pay for services in advance."

"The Russian national medical system provided emergency care that, while officially free of charge, may be of a quality that ranges from uncomfortable to unacceptable. Moreover, Russian doctors may demand payment for disposable needles, medications, and other services."

However, this is denied by those physicians that I talked to.

The Elizavetinsky Hospital is located in St. Petersburg and is a 1025 bed hospital (which can house up to 1250 patients in the winter) and covers an area of 1 million people; supposedly they have 200 patients a day in the ED, but on the day that I was there, it seemed deserted.

I took a taxi from my hotel, which was about an hour away. It is block after block of decrepit Soviet-era apartment houses. We

pulled up to a weed-grown lot before a small decrepit building. "Is this it?" I asked, being reluctant to get out of the cab and be stranded. The driver pointed to the sign, which indeed said Elizavetinsky Hospital (fortunately I can read Russian). It was the gatehouse, and I showed the caretaker my note and got a curt nod and a motion to go around the corner.

Eventually, I was able to find the office of the chief physician, Dr. Boris Tuites, with the aid of his interpreter, Dr. Anastasia Timoshenko. We discussed the education of physicians in the Russian Federation and that of emergency physicians in particular.

Medical education in the Russian Federation is six years after secondary school, followed by one year of what is an essentially rotating internship. Specialty training is about two years, which for them is a practice track. There is no emergency medicine residency or certifying examinations. All education is free with admission by examination.

I have always been impressed by the dedication and expertise of the physicians that I have met in Russia, but unfortunately they are hampered by their lack of money and equipment. Stretchers are old and rusty. Sheets and blankets are in short supply.



Figure 1: Rusty stretchers in the waiting area



Figure 2: Sheets and blankets are in short supply



Figure 3: Plan of the emergency department



Figure 4: The ICU

I was taken on a tour of the Emergency Department, which takes up the entire lower floor of the hospital, most of which seemed deserted. There are supposedly over 300 physicians and over 600 nurses who are employed by the hospital.

The emergency physician essentially is a triage officer, who takes care of minor problems and calls consultants when they are needed for more complex cases. Unlike in the United States, there is no trouble getting consultants, since they are all in-house and available around the clock. All of the major specialties have their own rooms dedicated to their needs.

The ambulance service is fine in theory. The Elizavinsky has three ambulances parked in the bay with no active calls. They usually have a driver and what corresponds to a paramedic and a physician. Only about 30% of calls are transported to the hospital, the rest taken care of on the spot. Once in the hospital emergency department they are seen by a nurse for triage and then evaluation by the emergency physician, who will decide which specialist to call. Since the specialists are all present in the hospital, there is a minimal delay in getting services. The director stated that the goal is to have all patients seen and treated within two hours.

The excellent specialty hospitals that I saw on my last visit were geared to the treatment of communist VIPs, who suddenly disappeared along with the large amounts of money needed to run these establishments. I was totally unable to get in touch with or get a visit to any of the hospitals that I had toured before.

In spite of the dedicated and intelligent physicians that I met, my impression is that, if you become seriously ill in the Russian Federation, you should seek transfer elsewhere. In St. Petersburg this usually means the University Hospital of Helsinki or the American Hospital in Paris. In the past, patients have been able to go the Department of Defense hospital in Frankfurt, but apparently this is no longer possible due to the pressures of the Iraq war. If you have travel insurance, it is important to read the fine print, since most travel policies only cover transport to the nearest medical center capable of taking care of your problem. This may mean going from bad to slightly less bad. What you want is repatriation to the United States, which very few policies provide for. One is the AMA program (only for AMA members who carry AMA insurance), which will repatriate after stabilization. No one will transfer an unstable patient. Another is AIG Travel Guard provided that you have purchased insurance for a single trip.

On my last day in Moscow there was a celebration by the armed forces paratroopers. The streets were filled with drunken young men, looking for trouble. It reminded me of Germany in the 1920s, a once great nation fallen on bad times, with a large group of angry young men looking for an outlet for their frustrations in violence. It only requires a charismatic leader to unite them. The Russian Federation is a nuclear powder keg waiting for the opportunity to explode.

Summary

Medical care in the Russian Federation has markedly deteriorated since the fall of the Soviet Union with decreased longevity (among males, due to trauma, alcoholism and suicide), falling birth rate and population, decrepit facilities, and shortages of supplies and drugs. The AIDS epidemic is the worst in the western world. Emergency medicine is not a recognized specialty, and there is no specialized training or certification in the field.

James Meade, M.D., Board Certified in Emergency Medicine, practiced in Syracuse, NY, where he was Clinical Assistant Professor of Surgery at Upstate Medical Center. Dr. Meade, retired from clinical practice, currently resides in Sarasota, FL. He continues to be active in the oral examination process and in the political realm in Tallahassee.

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