

patients—roughly equivalent to the rate that prevails in Afghanistan, according to Knaus.

Shortages, which plague the lowliest rural polyclinic and the best Moscow hospitals, also affect the quality of care. Not only do doctors occasionally run out of certain antibiotics, insulin, glycerine (for heart patients), and other drugs, but even bandages, absorbent cotton, thermometers, and iodine can be difficult to procure at times. The pattern extends to basic equipment. Last year, a West German company began construction of the first wheelchair factory in the Soviet Union; today, patients who cannot walk are carried about on stretchers. A female physician told Knaus, "With a stethoscope like [yours], I could become the best doctor in Siberia." Sometimes even the black market cannot compensate for the legal economy's shortcomings. "Like many other foreign residents in Moscow," notes *New York Times* correspondent Hedrick Smith, "I was frequently approached by Russian friends with urgent pleas for help in obtaining critically needed medicines, unavailable at any price in Moscow."

Perhaps the brightest spot in the Soviet health care system is the sanatorium. There are about 2,280 of these scattered around the country, most of them devoted to the treatment of particular ailments (arthritis, diabetes, hypertension) that do not require regular hospitalization. Here the average citizen can get the kind of individualized care in relatively pleasant surroundings that is lacking elsewhere. A typical stay lasts 24 days, marked by a doctor's visit every fourth day, mud baths and mineral water baths on alternating days, sound wave and heat treatments, regular exercise, and generous portions of food (including *kumys*, or mare's milk, which is believed to have strong curative powers).

### A Fundamental Illness

Access to the sanatoriums is controlled by labor unions, which distribute tickets as rewards to productive workers in lieu of raises, or to those workers who require special treatment. The sanatoriums serve some eight million Soviets annually. Tickets are highly prized. Often, a long wait, a bit of negotiation, and perhaps a few well-placed gifts are necessary to secure the privilege of a visit. Nobody knows if the sanatoriums' rather unorthodox treatments are effective, but patients seem to leave feeling happier. As one sanatorium doctor told Knaus, "A person's emotional reaction to disease is very important." In a way, these sanatoriums function as the Soviet Union's sugar pills.



*Soviet leaders can turn abroad for medical help. Leonid Brezhnev, here stumbling at a 1978 meeting with Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of West Germany, reportedly had a pacemaker implanted by British surgeons.*

At the apex of the Soviet medical pyramid is the complex of medical institutions, rest homes, and dispensaries that are reserved exclusively for the members of the Kremlin elite and their families, and that parallel the other perquisites of rank such as private dachas, chauffeured limousines, seaside vacation homes, and access to restricted shops selling foreign or scarce domestic goods.\*

Even at the top, though, the limitations of the Soviet system still show. Restricted hospitals provide the best that Soviet medicine has to offer in the way of doctors, drugs, and technology (much of it imported from the satellite countries or

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\*Distinctions of rank persist *within* the Kremlin polyclinic. A Soviet endocrinologist told Knaus that "deputy ministers and persons of lower rank are seen in regular private cubicles, but ministers have special examining rooms . . . There are carpets on the floor, bookcases, a leather couch, and heavy red drapes over the windows. It is like a living room, not a clinic."

from the West). Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for Kremlin physicians to transport blood samples needing special analysis to Finland. Top Western specialists are sometimes called in for delicate operations.

Cardiovascular problems are the concern of a growing number of Soviet medical researchers. In 1983, Moscow christened a vast, new 23-building headquarters for its national Cardiology Research Center, built at a cost of some \$117 million. The scientists have their work cut out for them: While deaths from heart disease and other cardiovascular ills dropped steadily between 1960 and 1980 in the United States, they doubled in the Soviet Union. Alcoholism is a major contributing factor, along with smoking, which is on the increase despite vigorous public health campaigns. (Since 1977, some cigarette packs have borne the warning: "Smoking is Hazardous to Your Health.") Cancer, the number two killer and also on the rise (as it is in the United States), is the domain of other specialized hospitals and research institutes.\*

### No Easy Cure

Accidents, poisonings, and injuries, long the third leading cause of death (as in the United States) have also increased in number, but apparently not as rapidly as respiratory diseases. According to Feshbach, the incidence of influenza, pneumonia, and similar maladies quintupled between 1960 and 1979; they may now constitute the Soviet Union's number three cause of death. Other infectious diseases—whooping cough, diphtheria, measles, mumps, scarlet fever—have also been on the rise. The explanation? Feshbach speculates that Soviet vaccines and medications are inferior in quality, insufficiently refrigerated during shipping, and administered under unsanitary conditions that nullify their effects. And it is also possible that vaccine manufacturers are diluting their products to meet their production quotas.

The harshest indictment of Soviet health care, however, is the unprecedented upsurge in deaths of children before their first birthday. Between 1970 and 1980, these increased by

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\*If past performance is any guide, there is little cause for optimism about Soviet research. Russian medical scientists have pioneered a few new medical techniques—an ultrasound treatment that shatters gallstones without surgery, a surgical procedure called radial keratotomy that alleviates severe myopia—but they lag behind in most areas. One reason is money. The United States outspends the Soviet Union 25 to 1 in medical research. Complicating matters is the lack of cross-fertilization between theory and practice: Physicians are barred from laboratories, and researchers are confined mostly to their institutes and seldom teach.