USSR Letter

For services rendered

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One of the less predictable features of Soviet censorship is a readiness to pass for publication material containing detailed and incisive criticism of contemporary public services. A distinction is clearly made between articles that question the country's basic politicoeconomic structure, and those that expose abuses and organisational shortcomings related to that structure. While the former do not pass the censor, the latter figure quite prominently in the Soviet press; they represent an indispensable element in the set of systems created by the regime to ensure feedback and social control.

Among the facets of daily life that provide topics for investigative journalism one that appears from time to time is bribe taking and extortion by medical personnel. On paper, health care is free or largely free at time of receipt, and the concept of a cash nexus between doctor and patient attracts virulent condemnation from Soviet propagandists, especially in the context of horror stories about the prohibitive charges for medical treatment in the USA. There was sound ideological justification, therefore, for the revelations contained in an article entitled "Tariff for the hour" that was recently published in *Krokodil*, the weekly satirical magazine.¹

In the dentist's chair

The first case recounted by two of *Krokodil's* special correspondents concerns a lady dentist on the staff of a polyclinic in Tbilisi (capital of the Georgian Republic). A patient suffering severe pain rushed into the dental surgery, was examined and told that he had paradontosis, and needed to have two teeth extracted. The dentist then added: "There is a scale of charges for each of my hours. So for the extraction of incisor number six you must give me a bottle of 'Bouquet of Abkhazia' [probably wine] and for the molar the cost is a bottle of 'Gremi' brandy." The patient readily agreed to make this informal payment, whereupon the offending teeth were skilfully extracted. For some reason this practice came under scrutiny at a meeting of the polyclinic's medical staff; there a conflict of opinions arose. Some people considered that it was repugnant and immoral to extort gifts for the performance of what was one's clear duty. If a dentist insisted on gratitude in the form of a bottle of brandy today, then tomorrow he would be calculating the value of each incisor in straight cash terms. Other colleagues, however, dismissed the matter as unimportant and even produced the saving formulation: "If a man has done his fellow a good turn, doesn't he have the right to expect gratitude for it?"

Readers may wonder how accurately the correspondents could reconstruct events of which they did not have first-hand knowledge. Since the text says nothing about the methods of

data collection and verification which were employed, possibly a certain amount of artistic licence has crept into the account. Nevertheless, it would undoubtedly ring true for a Russian—just as did many passages in the famous nineteenth-century satire *The Government Inspector* by Nikolai Gogol. Strikingly enough, the first scene of that play contains lines encapsulating attitudes to bribe taking that are remarkably similar to the ones cited above.² Just like the provincial officials in Gogol's play, the staff of the polyclinic eventually closed ranks, for the upshot of the meeting was that "they made the dentist promise to be more careful next time." Unfortunately for her, though, details of the incident became known to the inspectorate of the Georgian Health Ministry. Whether these inspectors possess summary powers of dismissal is not clear, but they certainly ensured that the dentist lost her job at the polyclinic.

Cash payment to doctors

Referring still to the Georgian capital, *Krokodil's* correspondents went on to tell of the existence of an unofficial tariff for various medical services. This was drawn to their attention in a letter of complaint from a reader (apparently a doctor) who was receiving treatment in Tbilisi. She had established that in one unit an operation on her stomach would cost 100 roubles, a consultation with a professor of cardiology 50 roubles, and a blood transfusion 40 roubles. She pointed out that, as she was chronically ill, she would be forced to turn to these doctors more than once.

Another serious case which arose in the same city concerns a reckless driver and a certain Dr R Oniani, who was then at the medical institute (in British phraseology, the medical school). This driver was being held responsible for an accident in which his opposite number had sustained grave injuries; he now stood to receive the maximum sentence for such an offence. How could a doctor help him? Well, he asked, would it be impossible to arrange for the injuries to be recorded as light, which is what the sentence would then be? To this request the doctor replied with a quotation from the Georgian poet Rustaveli: "A friend will assist his friend, sparing himself in nothing. . . ." Dr Oniani went on to explain that "in certain circumstances it was possible to procure a patient's case notes and insert a diagnosis that would bewilder an expert." Knowing what was meant by "certain circumstances," the driver took out his wallet and proffered the sum of 1000 roubles.

Here it is appropriate to enter a word of caution about citing a sterling equivalent for the bribe produced by the driver—the exchange rates depend not on the international money markets but on administrative decisions taken by the Soviet government machine. (These are effective because, as intending visitors discover, the Soviet Union does not permit the purchase of roubles through banks and bureaux in the West.) According to the official rate of exchange for tourists which operated at the end of 1979, 1000 roubles corresponds to £710. In the context of this article, however, it is more useful to

inquire about the relation which the sum bears to average earnings in the USSR. According to the statistical yearbook, the monthly average figure for white collar and manual workers (excluding those on collective farms) in 1977 stood at 155 roubles. So the bribe represented roughly six and a half times the average monthly wage.

Feathering her nest

The most flagrant example of doctors abusing their position vis à vis patients relates to a neuropathologist named M Alkhimova, who worked in the town of Zhdanov. Incidentally, *Krokodil* does not state that the practices being condemned are confined to Georgia (or that they are more prevalent there) and it is worth noting that Zhdanov is located in the Ukrainian Republic. The fact that the doctor in this case got away with so much for so long may be connected with her seniority in the local medical hierarchy, since as well as heading the neurological department of one hospital she held the post of chief neuropathologist for the town. Whether or not her seniority gave her a sense of immunity, she appears to have overlooked few opportunities in her passion for moneygrubbing.

The account of Dr Alkhimova's methods of extortion runs as follows. Suppose it is necessary to put the patient in a cosy corner of a ward—for that alone she suggests 50 roubles. Someone needs a scarce medicine—that will cost 100 roubles (although according to the list price a small bottle costs 82 kopeks). In conversation she employed various scientific terms, unscrupulously impressing on the patient that his organism needed intensified treatment—for which, my dearie, you must make a special payment. Convinced by what she said, and naturally hoping for good results, the patients and their relatives continued to respond as Alkhimova intended.

This doctor's total lack of compunction was epitomised in an anecdote about one patient's mother. Pressed for yet another gift, she lamented that she now had only one dress left. "What are you complaining about?" retorted Alkhimova, "I have never let you down." As it happens, the accuracy of that statement was confirmed by the correspondents—before they referred to the extent of the ill-gotten gains that were eventually discovered in her flat. There, the investigatory organs found that besides 14 000 roubles in cash she had amassed no fewer than 11 savings bank passbooks with total deposits amounting to 24 000 roubles. In what may be thought a poignant comment, the correspondents wrote: "Apparently Alkhimova intended to acquire her own personal two-storey little residence with an imported suite of 'Zhanna' furniture."

Discussion

When commenting on *Krokodil's* exposé, it is appropriate to note the ambivalent attitude displayed towards the least serious case—that of the dentist. As will be recalled, the correspondents mention that staff at the polyclinic were inclined to take a lenient view of the matter; they go on to confess that they themselves experience "some embarrassment." They then recount how they slipped the dressmaker a bottle of brandy, gave chocolates to the girl at the theatre cash desk when she sold them a ticket for a good seat, and presented a packet of flavoured chewing gum to a secretary "for her attention and kindness." In fact, the personalising of every-day transactions and encounters by means of gifts is so widespread in the Soviet Union that the correspondents would have forfeited their credibility if they had not somehow acknowledged this as a fact of life.

Since gift-giving in cash or kind is so deeply rooted in social values it is all the more likely that the owners of scarce skills will be tempted to exploit their position. This point was borne out by the venal doctor in Tbilisi when he quoted the line about the reciprocity of friendship in order to justify offering and accepting a substantial bribe to falsify a medical record. Com-

parably, the excesses of the neuropathologist in Zhdanov were made possible by a set of expectations held by patients and their relatives.

Given this sociocultural background, how can the incidence of such abuses possibly be reduced to the minimum? For *Krokodil's* correspondents the answer lies in the searchlight of public scrutiny and the force of public indignation. They hope that even a small bribe, such as the bottle of brandy for removing a tooth, will be treated as a scandal and consider that the discussion of such matters should take place not "in a small gathering of interested parties" but in conference halls with television coverage.

Before such a strategy could be implemented, however, a revolution in attitudes would surely be necessary. Indeed, in theory it may be that a more effective strategy would be to accept the existence of what has been termed "creeping capitalism"—and to build on its potential. In the context of the health service this would entail, among other things, introducing legislation to sanction direct payment by patients. So, instead of being officially free or largely free, medical care would be paid for at the time of receipt, presumably on an item-for-service basis. (That would not necessarily preclude patients receiving reimbursement from the State.) And to gain the advantage of competition in fee setting, it would be desirable to allow doctors freedom to "charge what the traffic will bear." Inevitably, a concomitant of those moves to liberate the market forces in Soviet medicine would be a general policy of de-bureaucratising, under which such arrangements as the salaried employee status would gradually be phased out.

A strategy of the kind outlined above is not, of course, being discussed in the Soviet press as a means of eradicating bribe taking and extortion by doctors. But the absence of such discussion serves to underscore the basic fact that, while journalists like *Krokodil's* correspondents are paid to detect abuses, they are expected to treat as sacrosanct the very system that fosters those abuses or at least enables them to thrive.

References

- ¹ Polishchik Ya, Ubilava K. *Tarif na Chas. Krokodil* 1973;30:2-3.
- ² Gogol NV. *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*. Tom 4. Nendeln Liechtenstein: Kraus, 1973;14.

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A 15-year-old girl is 137 cm tall and has been moderately obese. Can anything be done to increase her height? Her father is 175 cm and mother is 147 cm.

Nothing can be done to increase this girl's height. Although menarche occurred at 12, further increase in height is to be expected: according to Roche and Davila,¹ the mean age at which growth in stature ceases is 21.2 in men and 17.3 in women. This girl may well reach her mother's height. Maybe her previous obesity is a factor, though a small one; obese children are usually tall, owing to secondary adrenocortical overactivity, but premature closure of the epiphyses causes eventual stunting of growth. But the main factor here, given that there is no chronic disease not mentioned in the question, is the usual hereditary one.

¹ Roche AF, Davila GH. Late adolescent growth in stature. *Pediatrics* 1972;50:874.

An elderly active man has dermatomyositis—controlled by prednisolone and azathioprine—and hiatus hernia—helped by a low evening dose of cimetidine. He also suffers from occasional transient ischaemia attacks. What treatment might relieve this complaint?

The fact that the patient is already under treatment for dermatomyositis and hiatus hernia does not in my view alter the treatment for occasional transient ischaemic attacks. The best drug for this is still aspirin (enteric coated) 300 mg a day. There may be advantage in combining this with dipyridamole 100 mg thrice daily.