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The Health Crisis in Russia

By Christine Danton

A health crisis has emerged in Russia due to declining health and inadequate health care. The crisis is so severe that the term “disappearing population” has been applied to Russia due to a high death rate, low birth rate, and low life expectancy among its people. These factors continue to worsen due to inefficiency and a lack of resources throughout the health care system. The government has been slow to respond to the current crisis, often ignoring calls to reform the system and sometimes passing inappropriate measures. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and medical professionals report there is an urgent need to restructure the system, and recommend a number of programs to improve health care and reduce mortality. Continued government inaction will have a catastrophic impact on the economy, security, and quality of life in Russia. Access to health care needs to be recognized as a basic human right.

During the Soviet era, the health care system was highly centralized, wasteful, and inefficient. Despite the inefficiencies of the system, health care for patients was free—unlike the current system, which is inefficient *and* costly. The focus for the old system was on numbers, which frequently meant that patients were hospitalized unnecessarily and stayed longer so that the hospital could reach its quota. The inefficiencies of the system were fully exposed during the break-up of the Soviet Union, when the entire health care system virtually collapsed. The transition period was marked with a decline in health throughout the population due to stress, uncertainty, and poor diet. Increased demand for health care was unmet.

When Russia reformed the health care system, a monetized system was implemented. In order to function properly, this system required a free market economy, which was at the time just being constructed. Government contributions to the system have always been inadequate; patients are still having difficulty affording medications. Facilities often lack the most basic equipment, and providers of free services are forced to charge patients for care in order to keep their facilities open. Corruption and bribery are endemic to this system, which has the greatest negative impact on the poor and those who most need the care.

A number of sources estimate that the Russian population is declining by 700,000 people per year due to poor health and economic conditions. Russia is one of the few countries in the world where life expectancy is declining; it is currently at 59 years for males and 72 years for women. Fertility rates are low. Infant and under-5 child mortality rates are high. The leading cause of death among working age male and young adults is cardiovascular disease, accounting for 52 percent of deaths in Russia. Here, cardiovascular disease is attributed to stress and to harmful habits, such as smoking, drug abuse and alcoholism. Also attributed to alcoholism is the high rate of injury and poisoning, the second highest cause of death in Russia. This category includes homicide, suicide, traffic accidents and alcohol poisoning. High rates of tuberculosis, with the added challenge of drug-resistant strains and inadequate treatment, are also contributing to the overall decline in health. Despite current high levels of stress and suicide in Russia, little attention is being paid to developing mental health care.

Another factor in the current health crisis is HIV/AIDS. Russia has the highest rate of infection in Europe. High incidence of drug use meant that HIV/AIDS spread the fastest among this group

at first, but the shift has already been made to transmission among the general population. Little research has been done on HIV/AIDS in Russia and lack of data is hampering appropriate action. Current president Vladimir Putin announced a commitment of \$100 million to combat HIV/AIDS, but these funds are intended only for treatment, not for prevention or public education. Some analysts doubt that these funds will actually be allocated.

In response to declining birth rates, the government has approved financial incentives for mothers to have children by providing funds for child care. It is doubtful if the incentives are enough to substantially decrease the cost of childcare, or if mothers will actually receive the incentives. In either case, given the current health crisis, these incentives are unlikely to have any impact on birth rates.

Medical professionals and NGOs are urgently calling for a restructuring of the entire health care system. They urge the government to take the lead with appropriate comprehensive policy measures and to implement a national program to reduce mortality rates. In addition to federal policy, subprograms at the regional levels will be needed to target diseases and factors related to high mortality rates. Other recommended measures are improved emergency services, medical treatment, mental health care and road safety, as well as increased availability and affordability of medication.

If current demographic trends persist, the population of Russia is expected to decline by over 30 percent during the next 50 years. The immediate impact of this trend, however, must be recognized. It is important to acknowledge that quality of life in Russia today is dismal and needs to be addressed. During the Soviet era, Russia was the first country to implement a comprehensive health care plan for all citizens, free of charge, as a basic human right. Though the system did have its flaws and did not survive the economic reforms of the 1990s, many argue that it was far better than today's privatized system. Until health care is again recognized as a human right in Russia, quality of life will continue to decline, as will the potential for progress in all sectors of society.

2003. Health Care Systems in Transition: Russian Federation. Copenhagen: European Observatory on Health Care Systems, World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe.
<http://www.euro.who.int/document/e81966.pdf>.

Annotation: This article provides information regarding key health problems in Russia, the functioning of the health care system, and the impact of health care reforms. It provides information on delivery of health care services, plus a critique on specific areas that need to be addressed. The article closes with brief recommendations on increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of health care. It gives a comprehensive overview of how the entire system functions.

2006. "Moscow Hosts Key Aids Conference." In *BBC News*, 15 May. 2.

Annotation: This article provides brief statistics and information on the growing rates of HIV/AIDS infection across Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Ukraine and Russia have most of the region's cases, with Russia having the biggest HIV epidemic in Europe. One of the reasons for the quick spread of infection in Russia has been a lack of government response and the

assumption that HIV mainly affected foreigners. The conference is a long overdue and important step in establishing dialogue among activists, government officials and health workers on HIV/AIDS in the region.

2006. "Putin's Dwindling Russia." *International Herald Tribune*, 12 May. 1.

Annotation: This article reports on the recent state of the union address by Putin in Russia. One of the chief problems Putin addresses in his speech is the "vanishing Russian," which the reporter notes, is a very real problem. The Russian population is dwindling at a rate of 700,000 per year. In his speech, Putin promises subsidies to improve health care, to crack down on illicit alcohol, and to improve road safety. The reporter notes that democracy would be more effective in improving quality of life, as it would curb corruption and control the greedy. Unfortunately, democratic institutions cannot be installed overnight. A quicker solution would be to increase government funding for health care.

Aris, Ben. 2005. "Money for Health Care in Russia, at Long Last." *The Lancet* 366: 2.

Annotation: This article briefly outlines some key elements of the current health crisis in Russia by giving some brief but poignant information on decreasing life expectancy, annual population loss, increasing HIV/AIDS rates and high infant mortality rates. The author applauds the recent decision of the government to spend an extra \$17.8 billion to upgrade social services, including health care. While these funds are desperately needed, economists worry that more money in the system will raise inflation. The author notes that the reform announcement is part of a presidential campaign, implying that the funds are an empty promise.

Chen, Lincoln C., Friederike Wittgenstein, and Elizabeth McKeon. 1996. "The Upsurge of Mortality in Russia: Causes and Policy Implications." *Population and Development Review* 22 (3):10.

Annotation: This article discusses the increase in death rates in Russia since the collapse of communism. The article provides statistics on certain diseases and mortality rates. Average life expectancy in Russia dropped to levels lower than that of some countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The authors report that national surveys in Russia show that people have low awareness of the health consequences of various behaviors and a poor capacity to improve on or change behaviors. The authors assert that the mortality crisis cannot be attributed to one single factor, such as shock therapy, but is due to a variety of economic, social and political factors. The authors note the collapse of health care in the early 1990s, but do not correlate this with the decline in health of the population. Perhaps if they were writing in 2006 instead of 1996, their conclusions would be different.

Danisevski, Kirill and Mckee, Martin. 2005. "Reforming the Russian Health-Care System." *The Lancet* 365: 3.

Annotation: The authors assert that the Russian health care system is in dire need of reform. Life expectancy in Russia continues to decline, with many premature deaths resulting from causes that are preventable with effective health care. The authors point to the way the system is administered, through the government and inadequate regional programs, as one of the key limitations to proper functioning of the system. The article, however, does not offer any recommendations for appropriate reforms.

Eberstadt, Nicholas. 2005. "Russia, the Sick Man of Europe." *Public Interest* 158:18.

Annotation: This article is an excerpt from the author's "The Russian Federation at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century," published in the National Bureau of Asian Research. In this excerpt, Eberstadt describes the current health crisis in Russia, citing high mortality rates, low birth rates, and increased rates of disease and infection. Adding to the crisis is the lack of adequate health care to treat these health issues, some of which are easily curable. Policymakers and government officials have been very slow to act and, promises of funding have not been kept.

Farmer, Richard G., Alexei Sirotkin, Lilia Ziganshina, and Henry Greenberg. 2003. "The Russian Health Care System Today: Can American-Russian CME Programs Help?" *Cleveland Journal of Medicine* 70 (11): 5.

Annotation: The authors discuss the decline in health of the Russian population. This decline in health is particularly due to cardiovascular disease. The authors then point out flaws within the health care system, starting with the system in general, then hospitals, staff and education. The authors suggest that a continuing medical education (CME) program for physicians is a key to improving the health care system. While the summary is limited to discussing CME programs, the body of the article provides good information on the declining health of the population and the health care system in general.

Field, Mark G. 2005. "A Comment on the Russian Health Crisis." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 46 (7): 5.

Annotation: The author discusses the current health crisis in Russia, with a focus on the more severe issues of declining birth rates, premature mortality, HIV/AIDS, cardiovascular disease and tuberculosis. Many diseases and deaths are preventable with proper health care. The author makes an important point about the government's response to HIV/AIDS - that funds promised are for treatment rather than prevention. Overall, the health care system in Russia is inadequate, inefficient and under-financed. Since the privatization of the system in the 1990s, access to health care has become much more difficult, especially for poor people.

Fotaki, Marianna. 2006. "Users' Perceptions of Health Care Reforms: Quality of Care and Patient Rights in Four Regions in the Russian Federation." *Social Science & Medicine* 63:10.

Annotation: This article is a report on the findings of a survey carried out by the author in 1999-2000. The purpose of the survey was to explore patient perceptions of the quality of health care received, and to gauge whether they perceive an improvement in services since the health care system was reformed in the 1990s. The article also gives some in-depth information on the problems within the current system, such as lack of financing to sustain the system, scarcity and high cost of medicines and corruption. The article provides a unique perspective, via the patients, of the health care system. Survey results found that patients did not see an improvement in the system since reform.

Gerber, Theodore P. and Sarah E. Mendelson. "Crisis among Crises among Crises." *Problems of Post-Communism* 52 (4): 28-41.

Annotation: This article discusses how the increasing HIV/AIDS infection rate is viewed by the general public and by health care professionals. Overall, concern among the general public over HIV/AIDS is actually decreasing, but this perception is not consistent through different demographic groups. Concern among the youth is greatest. Health professionals overall believed the government was doing enough to address the problem, whereas NGO workers believed the opposite. In any case, lack of official data is hampering action. Passivity among the general public to HIV/AIDS, the authors assert, is due to the fact that there are many ongoing health crises that people are facing, such as cardiovascular disease, tuberculosis, alcoholism and cancer. These crises are compounded by lack of adequate health care.

Kabanov, M. M. 2006. "Mental Health Issues in Contemporary Russia." *International Journal of Mental Health* 34 (4): 6.

Annotation: This article addresses mental health issues in Russia from the Soviet period to present day. There has been a paradigm shift with regard to mental health issues. During the Soviet period research or specialization in social psychiatry, medical psychology and sociology were practically prohibited. More recently, however, fields of study and research have expanded well into these areas. In general, the stigma attached to mental illness and those seeking treatment is starting to weaken. This is a positive development, Kabanov notes, because there is a growing need for mental health care due to current instability and economic crisis. Suicide rates in Russia, especially in the army, have increased dramatically. New treatment facilities have opened and more are under construction. Kabanov cautions that some centers are not seeking input from specialists or from the general public.

Marquez, Patricio V. 2005. *Dying Too Young: Addressing Premature Mortality and Ill Health Due to Non-Communicable Diseases and Injuries in the Russian Federation*. The World Bank, Europe and Central Asia Human Development Department.

Annotation: This report is one of the most comprehensive sources of information on declining health in Russia. It discusses all of the health factors contributing to the decline in life expectancy and increase in mortality. It also discusses what measures are being taken and what

remains to be done. It suggests a program of action to improve the health of the population and highlights the potential benefits of implementing the program, namely the economic benefits of a healthier population. The report does not discuss quality of life as a benefit of improving health, nor does it mention health or health care as a human right.

Ostrovsky, Arkady. 2005. "Bribery in Russia up Tenfold to \$316bn in Four Years." *Financial Times*, 22 July.

Annotation: This article discusses the drastic increase in bribery and corruption in Russia during the past four years. The article reports that health care is among the most corrupt sectors. People are trying to escape paying bribes and seem to only be willing to pay them if their lives or the lives of their family depend on the service. The article notes that there are millions of people in Russia who don't get any medical care because they can't afford private care and they can't afford to pay bribes at states hospitals. Corruption must be addressed in order to improve access to health care.

Parfitt, Tom. 2005. "The Health of Russia's Children." *The Lancet* 366:2.

Annotation: This article provides a good overview of the children's health crisis in Russia. The author discusses the inadequacies of the health care system in general, in that it focuses on treatment instead of prevention and that health care is often unavailable in remote areas. The author then focuses in on the issues affecting children and youth, for example the infant mortality rate, the under-5 mortality rate and the high HIV infection rate among teenagers. One of the major problems is the structure of the system and, the author asserts, the frequent and destructive intervention of Western specialists and the World Bank.

_____. 2005. "Russia's Population Crisis." *The Lancet* 365: 2.

Annotation: This article provides demographic statistics and an overview of the numerous factors causing the increase in mortality rates in Russia. Circulatory diseases, alcoholism, AIDS, tuberculosis, road accidents and suicides are eroding the population at an alarming rate. Experts say that greater spending on health care is vital to improving the health of the population. Health care services will need to be improved; many facilities lack basic equipment and patients are not receiving appropriate care. The rural areas in particular are in desperate need of services. If trends continue, Russia's population could drop by at least 20 million over the 20 years.

Press, Associated. 2006. "Putin Hits Back, Criticizing U.S. In Yearly Address." *The Washington Post*, 11 May, 1.

Annotation: This article reports on Vladimir Putin's state of the nation address in Russia. In his address, Putin calls the demographic decline problem the "most acute problem of contemporary

Russia.” He calls on legislators to budget for childcare support subsidies, educational benefits for mothers, and an increase in 'birth bonuses'.

Pridemore, William Alex. 2004. “Weekend Effects of Binge Drinking and Homicide: The Social Connection between Alcohol and Violence in Russia.” *Society for the Study of Addiction* 99(8):9.

Annotation: This article is a research report based on the author’s analysis of death certificates of those aged between 20-64 years in the Udmurt Republic. The findings report a high correlation between alcohol consumption and homicide. The number of alcohol deaths was significantly higher on Fridays and Saturdays as was the number of homicides. The article includes data on the prevalence of alcohol consumption among Russians and the severe impact this consumption is having on the overall health of the population.

Rimashevskaja, N. M. “The Social Vector of the Development of Russia.” *Russian Social Science Review* 46 (6):4-51.

Annotation: This article discusses the impact of economic reforms on Russian society. Regarding health, the author notes the decline in health care at a time of increased need. The current decline in birth rates, infant mortality, the increase in mortality and the increase in diseases are all issues that need to be addressed immediately. The author calls for drastic social reforms in order to improve the health of the population and to improve access to health care. This article situates health and health care in the broader context of Russian society as a whole. This is helpful for understanding the potential impact of these issues on many different areas within society.

Reese, Andrey, Dina Balabanova, Kirill Danishevski, Martin McKee, Rod Sheaff. 2005. “Implementing General Practice in Russia: Getting Beyond the First Steps.” *BMJ* 331: 4.

Annotation: The authors give a brief background of the Soviet health care system, then discuss what reforms have been made to convert to the current monetized system. They point out that the implementation of reform has been slow in a number of areas, including primary care. Insufficient funding, lack of resources, and inadequate training are preventing full development of the new system. This article, although short, provides a good general overview of how the new monetized health care system functions.

Rimashevskaja, N. M., and Korkhova, I. V. 2004. “Poverty and Health in Russia.” *Sociological Research*, 43 (3):26.

Annotation: This article discusses the correlation between poverty and health and its reciprocal influence. Data over the past ten years shows a catastrophic decline in the health of Russia's population, with an increase in almost all of the main classes of diseases. Decline in health, coupled with economic instability, has led to a “pauperization” of the population. This article

provides information on all the main diseases. It also discusses how birth rates and reproductive health have been affected through this period. The authors recommend a restructuring of the health care system, raising medical staff salaries, and improving access to health care.

Rybakovskii, L. L., Zakharova, O. D., Ivanova, A. E. and Demchenko, T. A. 2004. "Russia's Demographic Future." *Russian Social Science Review* 45 (3):21.

Annotation: This article discusses the increasing disease and death rates, declining life expectancy, declining birth rates, and the increase of poisoning deaths in Russia today. Each of these factors is having a drastic effect on the population. Poor health and lower life expectancy will adversely affect the labor force and the potential for economic development for years to come. While this article does not discuss the impact of inadequate health care on these demographic factors, it provides good information on each factor and provides statistics for different points throughout the 1990s.

Schechter, Kate. 1992. "Soviet Socialized Medicine and the Right to Health Care in a Changing Soviet Union." *Human Rights Quarterly* 14(2):10.

Annotation: The author discusses how health care as a human right is a fairly new concept. The author notes that the Soviet Union was the first country to experiment with a fully socialized health care system, providing comprehensive health care to all of its citizens as a basic human right. Unfortunately, although health care during this period was free, there were not enough resources to carry out this plan. This article was written just after the collapse of the health care system. The author offers a number of reasons why collapse occurred. She recommends a few strategies to implement an effective health care system and stresses that the right to health care in Russia should be respected by the new form of government.

Vinogradov, Mikhail. 2005. "Putin's 'New Deal.'" *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, 5 October.

Annotation: This article reports on a recent meeting that Russian President Putin had with many government leaders. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss how, as spoken by the President, "to improve quality of life" for the population. Among his top concerns was health care, especially primary care, medical equipment, and supplies. Also, Putin demanded that doctor and nurse salaries be increased for 2006. Experts caution that extra funding in the system could cause an increase in inflation. The reporter noted that the timing of this meeting coincided with the impending start of the new political season, casting doubt over whether this meeting was aimed at improving health care or if it was a political move.

Vislogusov, Vadim and Osipova, Yulia. 2005. "Mikhail Zurabov Is Going Back to Free Medical Care." *Kommersant*, 8 September.

Annotation: This article includes a brief report of government proceedings regarding current issues. At this time, the Russian government was debating action on health care reform. The Minister of Health is quoted as saying that the medical insurance system is “down the drain”. While this article is brief, it provides information on the health care at certain date within time, which is important for understanding the intention of the government and the reform process as a whole.

Webster, Paul. 2004. “Reforms Mean 25 Million Russians Lose Free Health Care.” *Synopsis* 171(10):1.

Annotation: This article provides concise information on the impact of the newly implemented monetized health care system in Russia. Reforming the system means that health care will no longer be provided free of charge, and patients will have to begin paying for care and medicines out of pocket. The shift to the monetized system will have the greatest impact on the poor, who are often in the most need of health care services.

Wegren, Stephen K. 2003. *Russia's Policy Challenges: Security, Stability and Development*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.

Annotation: The author focuses on Russia’s foreign and domestic policies, and policy challenges now confronting the government. Wegren discusses the different ways in which economic “shock therapy” ruined the lives of many citizens. He lists the decline in quality of health care among the more pressing issues. He also points out the increase in alcoholism, showing how it has had a negative impact on the health of the population as a whole—including an increase in violence due to assault or homicide. This book covers a number of issues unrelated to health care, but was helpful to gain perspective on health care within the broader framework of Russian society and the effects of shock therapy.

Yasmann, Victor. 2006. “Russia: Health Ministry Considers Solutions To Population Decline.” In *Radio Free Europe - Radio Liberty*, 10:3.

Annotation: This author states that declining population is one of the most acute problems facing Russia today. He provides some statistics on mortality rates, low life expectancy, population decline, and suicide rates in Russia, which give perspective on the severity of a number of health issues. He reports the contrasting views between health experts and government officials as to what measures should be implemented to improve the health of the population. The author does not provide a closing statement or opinion on what measures need to be taken.