

Rural Health Care in The Chernobyl Region

By Edward Martinez and Zoya Shabarova

The driving wind and cold that seeped through our jackets seemed appropriate weather for our one-day visit last October to rural health facilities in Ivankiv Rayon, an agricultural area 70 miles north of Kiev severely affected by the Chernobyl disaster of April 1986. Although only an hour and a half from Kiev, we seemed to be decades away from 1997. With little access to transportation, mental health services and sometimes even such basic needs as heat and refrigeration, the area presents an often-bleak portrait of the fallout from the world's most serious nuclear accident.

In the village of Pyrogovychy, for example, depressed living conditions were made vivid as we observed a horse-drawn cart with automobile tires loaded with hay and manure. It was followed by two elderly men carrying boxes of mushrooms they had harvested from an area considered to be contaminated.

The Ivankiv region directly borders the 30-km exclusion zone around Chernobyl, which was evacuated after the accident and will not be considered safe for human habitation for years to come. The region has 82 settlements or villages, and its population of 40,000-including 7,000 children under the age of 15-is declining.

Medical Services in the Rayon

The health care sector is generally understaffed throughout the Ivankiv region, with only the Ivankiv Central Rayon Hospital adequately staffed. According to a recent Kiev Oblast Health Administration order, all overtime pay for physicians is to be curtailed, and eight feldsher stations will be closed, six of which provided obstetrical care. Sonography, endoscopy, colonoscopy and X-ray equipment are only available at Ivankiv Central Rayon Hospital, and ambulances are old and inadequately equipped.

The hospital campus is comprised of a polyclinic, children's outpatient department and a patient transportation department with two ambulances. The main hospital has 270 beds for adults and pediatric patients. The other rayon hospital has 45 beds and one ambulance. There are six satellite rural hospitals with 10 beds each, 2 ambulatory facilities, and 51 feldsher stations.

We met with Dr. Oleg Sorokin, deputy head physician of Ivankiv Rayon. An epidemiologist by training, his main responsibilities include managing health care in the rural areas. We also met with Dr. Ekaterina Ganzha, a psychiatrist who has worked in the Ivankiv Central Rayon Hospital for 30 years.

Mental Health Services

Anxiety about health effects of the accident and stress from relocation have increased the need for mental health services in the area. Ganzha believes that there is a physiological linkage between radiation and the acuity of psychiatric conditions. After the Chernobyl disaster, certain psychiatric conditions became more acute, requiring more aggressive treatment.

But only one psychiatrist serves the more than 1,000 mental health patients in the rayon. Ganzha's department occupies two adjacent rooms in the Polyclinic Department of the Central Rayon Hospital. The psychiatric service is considered fully staffed with one psychiatrist, one psychiatric nurse, and one nurse-social worker. There is one toxicologist who treats alcoholism and drug abuse but a medical psychology service is not available. Exacerbating this situation, there is a general lack of drugs to treat psychiatric disorders.

Psychiatric patients requiring inpatient care are referred to the Kiev Oblast Psychiatric Hospital, located near Kiev. After two or three weeks of treatment, patients are followed up in the Ivankiv Rayon Hospital. The lack of transportation is a serious problem for families needing to visit patients. In

addition, Ganzha cannot adequately follow up because she does not have a car to go to the patients' homes.

Not all discharged patients are examined by the psychiatrist within one month after discharge, and patient medical records generally are not sent to the psychiatrist's office in a timely manner. Further, according to Dr. Ganzha, the rate of admittance to Kiev Oblast Psychiatric Hospital is not satisfactory for children and teenagers from Ivankiv.

Pediatric Services

Some of the most documented health problems stemming from Chernobyl affect children. In Ukraine, Belarus and southern Russian, there have been over 600 cases of thyroid cancer in children, a 100-fold increase over the normal incidence of 0.5 cases per million per year, according to WHO.

The Ivankiv Rayon Hospital has a pediatric department with 20 beds. On the day of our visit, there were 15 children with respiratory diseases. The rural hospitals do not provide pediatric care, and the feldsher stations provide only basic pediatric care and observation. All pediatric patients are referred to the Ivankiv Rayon Hospital for inpatient treatment. If a child needs specialized treatment in hematology, he or she is referred to the Boyarka Oblast Children's Hospital (an hour and-a-half car ride from Ivankiv), with follow-up provided by the Ivankiv Rayon Hospital. Children are referred to the Republican Center of Radiology Medicine in Puscha-Voditsa, near Kiev, for radiation-related illnesses.

An annual medical assessment for children and teenagers is provided by Ivankiv Rayon physicians from January to May. But there is no strict assessment program for adults.

The Rural Hospital

The rural hospital in the village of Pribyrsk has an inpatient facility with two wards for 10 patients. We saw only geriatric patients in the hospital, five women and five men crammed into two rooms. The medication cabinet had only very basic supplies for treatment, and the heating system was not functioning, despite an outside temperature in the low 40s. There is also an ambulatory facility with a pharmacy from which patients can purchase needed medications. The head physician of the rural hospital is a dentist who has worked there for 30 years; there are eight nurses assigned to the facility. Hospital foodstuffs are stored in an earthen bunker outside the building. But despite these obvious hardships, the staff appeared to be positive and caring.

Feldsher Stations

In the village of Orane we visited a feldsher station-- essentially a first aid station--run by a woman of pension age. The building was constructed in 1987 as part of the response to Chernobyl, but was poorly constructed and not maintained. The heat did not function, and the temperature inside the station was at least 10 degrees colder than outside. Elderly feldshers were bundled into coats and gloves.

The second station we visited was in the village of Pyrogovychny. In the station we saw a container under a sink with disposable syringes soaking in an unknown solution for "sterilization." There were only very basic first-aid supplies in the station and no equipment.

We were told that one-third of the feldshers in the rayon were in their mid-20s and the rest were of pension age (sixties). This highlighted the major health care workforce shortage that the rayon is experiencing and which will intensify as the aging caregiver population declines. According to regulations, all feldshers must have training every five years using a curriculum developed by the Oblast Administration. This was portrayed as a formality and not a high priority.

That evening we returned to Kiev. As we entered the central part of the city, we drove by the new McDonald's and Arizona Bar & Grill Restaurant along the Dnieper River, 70 miles and a world away from Ivankiv Rayon.

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