therapist will be able to tell you where the nearest centre is.

I thank Ruth Whittaker, of Leeds Social Services, for her help and Glynis Cooper and Barbara Dibb for their secretarial help.

Appendix

FURTHER READING

Stowe J. How to give your home a lift. *Care Weekly* 1988 Oct 7:28.

Goodwill CJ, Chamberlain MA, eds. *Rehabilitation of the physically disabled adult*. London: Croom Helm, 1988.

Stowe J. *Guide to the selection of the stairlifts*. Available from Rheumatology and Rehabilitation Research Unit, 36 Clarendon Road, Leeds LS2 9NZ. (£3.00.)

British Standards Institute. *Specification for powered stairlifts*. Leeds: British Standards Institute, 1979. (BS 5776.)

USEFUL ADDRESSES

Disabled Living Foundation, 380-384 Harrow Road, London W9 2HU (071 289 6111)

Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation, 25 Mortimer Street, London W1 (071 637 5400)

College of Occupational Therapy, 6-8 Marshalsea Road, Southwark, London SE1 1HL (071 357 6480)

USSR Letter

Creating an association of Soviet doctors

Michael Ryan

Rage and phrenzy will pull down more in half an hour, than prudence, deliberation and foresight can build up in a hundred years.

Those words of Edmund Burke, affirming the principles of order and continuity, may apply not only to major political institutions but also to those organisations which he called the "little platoons" of society. By the twentieth century these had come to include a range of professional associations, and in Russia, following the October revolution, these soon fell victim in the Bolsheviks' campaign to annihilate potential sources of opposition to the untrammelled exercise of state power. Today, however, a new generation of independent groups is being created thanks to the determination of individuals who act together as members of grassroots movements. This surely constitutes one of the most promising developments in a country emerging from the ruins of its totalitarian past.

How do Soviet doctors perceive their existing professional organisation known as the Union of Medical Workers? Set up by the Bolsheviks some 70 years ago, it embraces all categories of health care personnel, and throughout its history, like other unions, primarily served to convey the state's priorities to its membership. Under Gorbachev the concept of democratisation, along with that of glasnost, has been espoused as a means of furthering the radical transformation of the country's socioeconomic system. In theory, therefore, democratisation of the Union of Medical Workers would be the preferred strategy of a health service leadership which urgently needs to include rank and file doctors in the herculean task of improving the quality of medical care for the Soviet population.

A degree of support for that interpretation may be discovered in the record of the All-Union Congress of Doctors, which met at the Kremlin during October 1988. The first of its sort since 1925, the congress had been organised under an official aegis and shows that democratisation was being taken seriously in this sector of the economy. The first morning's session was attended by Gorbachev, along with other political leaders.

In the opening address by Yevgeni Chazov, the then USSR Minister of Health, no mention was made of the already current proposal to form an independent Association of Soviet Doctors. The first delegate who raised the issue was a youngish looking woman doctor from Leningrad's emergency aid service. In a brief generalised definition of such an association's functions L N Devotchenko said that it "would resolve all matters concerning the social and legal defence of doctors, contribute to raising the prestige of doctors

and look after other matters which create pressing problems for us."

Presumably she thought that these functions could be undertaken effectively only by a new, completely autonomous body. Certainly the president of the union's central committee (Lidiya Novak) got a roasting from another delegate who, expressing a widely shared view, complained that her speech contained "nothing constructive for improving the conditions of work and daily life of medical workers." Later a Moscow cardiologist, Aleksandr Sviridov, wrote off the union as "having long ago discredited itself with the bureaucratism which flourished within it."

Preliminary moves

Taken as a whole, Sviridov's speech might be thought to convey the impression of a man who combines an incisively analytic mind with exceptional moral courage.¹ Among other things he went on record as saying that the administrative command style of management persisted in the work of the health ministry and that no mechanism existed to guarantee democratisation in the restructuring of health care. He went on to propose a refinement of the idea of a doctors' association—namely, an association of practising doctors. The objective, in essence, was to create a sense of collective self determination and self confidence among doctors in the front line.

Despite the new political climate which favoured the formation of independent organisations of all sorts it seemed for some time as if an All-Union Association of Doctors would not come into being. Writing in *Meditsinskaya gazeta* some four months later Sviridov identified as a major inhibiting influence the sense of alienation among doctors which had been induced by the bureaucratisation of medicine in the Soviet Union.² His pessimistic characterisation of the position was as follows:

Things have reached a point where a doctor essentially has ceased to be answerable for his work. He carries out the instructions of superordinate organisations without thinking and they bear the responsibility for his work. The most deplorable thing is that such a situation is convenient for many of us.

For Sviridov apparently the association would be at least as concerned to raise standards of competence and commitment as to defend clinicians vis à vis the administration and to improve terms and conditions of work. (Incidentally, he describes as a "common matter" the non-payment of doctors and nurses for additional duties.) Most importantly the association could take over responsibility (from the health ministry) for

Centre of Russian and East
European Studies,
University College of
Swansea, Swansea
SA2 8PP

Michael Ryan, PHD, lecturer
in politics and Russian studies

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administering the postdiploma system of quality control known as certification. Sviridov wrote:

This will help to rid medicine of those who lack talent and the half-educated, persons who are morally unscrupulous and those who were able to obtain a diploma with the help of their connections or even simply for money.

The task of fostering a renaissance of Soviet medical practice could also include action to end the ordinary doctor's isolation from colleagues in other countries. One means of achieving this broad objective was identified as ensuring the availability of foreign medical journals and, given the shortage of hard currency, it is understandable that Sviridov should express hopes about the help of "foreign colleagues." A particularly imaginative suggestion was that the association could fund a scheme to send outstanding students abroad for a period of practice and study.²

At that time Sviridov wrote purely as an individual—though obviously an emergent leader—and well over a year was to pass before his idea became a reality. A useful outline of its faltering progress may be found in an article published in November 1989 by *Meditsinskaya gazeta*.³ In this matter, as in others, it acted as a sounding board for readers' opinions.

To judge from the editorial postbag, initial responses to the proposal of an all union association were most enthusiastic (Splendid! Wonderful! At last!) When the draft constitution was published, however, approbation fell off sharply because, in the view of the majority, it had been composed in a traditional frame of reference and failed to reflect the ideal of democratisation. The names of those responsible were demanded.

Once the members of the working party and editorial commission had been identified it became clear that "there were many administrators and functionaries and few rank-and-file doctors." As the article acknowledges the working party had been set up to conform with a resolution of the October 1988 congress, but that did not save it from denunciation in correspondence.

In the event, a sort of peaceful transfer of power occurred with the initial working party voluntarily bowing out in favour of a representative meeting composed of individuals from local doctors' associations. Incidentally, it casts an interesting sidelight on the process of creating a civil society in the USSR that local health service agencies and the Union of Medical Workers were prepared to meet the expenses of attending this meeting in Moscow.

Further complications

By the end of December 1989 another retarding influence, which operated at a much wider level, had become increasingly salient; this was the determination of various constituent parts of the USSR to move towards unqualified independence as sovereign nation states. The article in *Meditsinskaya gazeta* noted that several republics (especially the Baltic republics) already had their own associations of doctors which "have not yet expressed any clear desire to become members of the All-Union organisation."

While *Meditsinskaya gazeta* no longer expressed a crude party line it remained, to quote from its masthead, "the organ of the USSR Ministry of Health, USSR Ministry of medical industry and the Central Committee of the professional union of medical workers." So it is hardly surprising that the article implicitly conveyed disapproval of centrifugal tendencies and the preoccupation of doctors at local level

with "their own associations and working parties."⁴ Of course you could disagree with the value judgment in question but still respect the commitment of those who worked for an all union association.

An additional diversion of energies occurred in connection with the evolution of reformed unions throughout the economy. In May 1990 a draft constitution for the all union federation of professional unions of health care workers was published and early in June the founding congress of the union for the Russian Federation took place. Only detailed investigation can show to what extent this development represents the old guard in new uniform.

From now on, it seems, these unions are in some sort of competition with the All-Union Association of Soviet Doctors. For that organisation had eventually been born in April 1990 at a conference attended by 47 delegates from more than 10 cities of the Russian Federation and from five of the union republics. According to the report its formation occurred against a background of sometimes heated arguments in which delegates defended diametrically opposed points of view.

One topic of debate was the desirability of the association having an overtly political stance. Ought it to take an active part in "the battle for political and economic restructuring of the country?" The final decision was incorporated in the formulation adopted to describe the association. The delegates resolved that it should be "a self-governing, independent, voluntary, social and professional organisation without any political objectives."

All the same, one of the association's aims and objectives is the mobilisation of opinion among doctors and the general public in favour of the "resolution of socio-medical and ecological problems." Others, predictably, concern professional self improvement and what can be broadly termed a defence function. Also specified is "active participation in the development of the science and practice of medicine with the object of protecting the health of the population."

The likely future of the association would obviously have been a topic at the back of the delegates' minds. One delegate considered that the association's success would depend to a large extent on "who heads the territorial-regional associations." As for the centre, the person chosen to be the first president was, most appropriately, Aleksandr Sviridov.

Against the odds

Realistically enough the delegates considered that their main worry was the absence of rights (*bespravie*) for doctors as such. This worry extended from the personnel of a sector hospital to the top where the minister had to confront the finance ministry and other union departments which wanted to regulate a doctor's activities. "In a word," states the report, "war was declared against the bureaucratic apparatus."⁴ So perhaps the newly founded association can be perceived as a David preparing for battle against Goliath.

1 Anonymous. *Vsesoyuznyi s"ezd vrachei Moskva 17-19 oktyabrya 1988: materialy i stenogramma s"ezda*. Moskva: Meditsinskaya entsiklopediya, 1989.*

2 Sviridov A. Assotsiatsiya vrachei: vremya prishlo. *Meditsinskaya gazeta* 1989 fevralya 10:1.

3 Pospelov S. Assotsiatsii vrachei. *Meditsinskaya gazeta* 1989 noyabrya 24:1.

4 Belotserkovskaya I. Assotsiatsiya vrachei SSSR sozdana! *Meditsinskaya gazeta* 1990 aprelya 27:1-2.

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