

50 YEARS OF SOVIET HEALTH CARE

On July 11, 1918 V. I. Lenin signed a decree authorizing the formation of the People's Commissariat of Health of the RSFSR. N. A. Semashko, an experienced Bolshevik and collaborator of Lenin, was appointed the first People's Commissar of Health. July 11, 1918 was the official date of creation of Soviet health care, now celebrating its 50th anniversary.

The progress made by Soviet health care during this period is beyond measure. It had to begin by bringing together the limited and scattered medical resources, by fighting against epidemics, famine, and devastation, with their social and medical consequences, and against diseases caused by the poverty, backwardness, and ignorance of large masses of the population neglected under tsarist rule, and by spreading medical education; yet soon after the establishment of Soviet rule it had grown into a significant force. The Soviet health services worked extremely hard in the period of economic recovery and during the years of the first 5-year plans. During the Second World War workers of the health services made an important contribution to victory by maintaining the standard of health behind the front line and providing effective medical aid to the Soviet armed forces. The postwar period was characterized by the rapid development of all branches of the Soviet health services. It is now an up to date and powerful system dedicated to safeguarding the health of the Soviet people, the builders of Communism.

In a comparatively short period of history many serious infectious diseases which were widespread in tsarist Russia (malaria, the typhus fevers, certain infectious diseases of children, poliomyelitis, etc.) have been eradicated from the Soviet Union or their incidence considerably reduced. During the last 10 years, for example, the incidence of tuberculosis has been almost halved, that of diphtheria reduced 15 times, and that of poliomyelitis reduced 25 times. The Soviet Union is one of the countries with the lowest overall mortality; compared with before the Revolution, infant mortality has fallen by more than 10 times. The mean life expectation of Soviet citizens has been more than doubled and has now reached 70 years. The mean life expectation has increased particularly rapidly among those peoples of the USSR who, before the Revolution, were destined to degenerate or die out. Soviet workers are provided with free medical examination and treatment and a wide network of health resorts. In 1965 the number of hospital beds was 2,225,500, and according to the plan, in 1970 this will increase to 2,680,000.

Progress in Soviet health care is to a large measure due to planned training of medical recruits. The USSR now heads the world list for number of physicians. The number of physicians at work in the country is 577,800, i.e., more than one quarter of all physicians in the world and almost half the number of Europe. By 1970 the number of physicians will have increased to 700,000.

Soviet medical science is playing an important role in the development of the Soviet health services, and the improvement of medical care and prevention. Before the Revolution there was only one well equipped research institute in the whole country, the Institute of Experimental Medicine founded in 1870 in St. Petersburg. Medical Research is now carried out in 315 scientific institutions under the control of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR, where about 50,000 scientific workers are employed, more than 20,000 of them with the degree of Candidate and almost 3,500 with the degree of Doctor of Sciences. A vast amount of scientific research is also carried out in departments of medical teaching institutes in the country.

From the beginning progressive Soviet scientists gave great assistance in the organization of Soviet health care and today they devote all their efforts to the development of Soviet science. Dozens of well known schools in clinical and theoretical medicine have grown and achieved world-wide recognition. The Communist Party and the Soviet Government have shown a constant concern with the development of medical science. The devoted and humanitarian work of doctors is highly valued in the country. They attract the attention and enjoy the respect of the population. A shining testimony to the care of our Government for the development of medical science was the decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR entitled "The Conditions Facilitating Scientific Work on Academicians I. P. Pavlov and his Collaborators," approved in 1921, a most difficult year for the country, and signed in person by Lenin.

Soviet medical science is equipped with all modern research methods, and specialists in different fields are called in to study medical problems. Well equipped scientific technological centers have been founded, provided with all the latest engineering techniques. The unity of theory and practice is yielding remarkable results: practical application provides a constant stimulus to the development of theoretical medicine, which in turn enriches the practical side with its latest discoveries. It has been made possible for medical practitioners to participate in scientific research. Thousands of physicians are taking part in postgraduate study. Many articles by medical practitioners are published in this journal.

The building of Communism in the Soviet Union presents tremendous problems to the Soviet health service. There is no doubt that they will be solved. Soviet medical workers, practitioners and reserach workers, devote all their efforts and knowledge to the service of their people and their country in the name of the peace, happiness, and health of all mankind.