

# Sickness on the rise for Russian children EPIDEMIC / Industrial pollution believed to be one reason for increase in illnesses

---

*Globe & Mail (Toronto, Canada)*, July 24, 1995  
From Opposing Viewpoints in Context

Byline: GEOFFREY YORK

Moscow RUSSIA -- BY GEOFFREY YORK Moscow Bureau Moscow Valentin Palma's neurosurgery ward is a world of brain tumours, deformities, cleft palates, oversized skulls and strange spinal growths.

There are 30 children waiting for operations or recovering from surgery. Most are suffering from the mysterious birth defects that have increased dramatically in Russian cities in recent years.

In one crib, a 20-month-old girl with a grossly enlarged head is crying desperately. She has already had an operation to remove a spinal hernia and another to drain water from her head. Soon she will need a third operation on her urinary system. "This is a typical case," Dr. Palma says, showing no emotion.

The infant girl is from Rostov-on-Don, an industrial city in southwestern Russia. Asked why she is so sick, Dr. Palma mentioned the heavy concentration of military factories in the region.

Industrial pollution, the toxic legacy of the Soviet Union's obsession with massive chemical and metallurgical factories, is believed to be one of the biggest reasons for the rising level of sickness and disease among Russian children.

About 10 per cent of all Russian children are born with deformities or other birth defects, and this is increasing by an estimated 2 percentage points annually. One-fifth of the birth defects are caused by pollution, according to Alexei Yablokov, the head of a Russian environmental commission.

There are other factors too. Radiation poisoning from the Chernobyl nuclear accident is still a major cause of birth defects. Uncontrolled use of fertilizers is contaminating the vegetables in the markets. Poverty and economic turmoil are making it difficult for pregnant women to get proper food and medicine. Alcohol abuse has reached epidemic levels. And the state-run health-care system is crumbling.

Even if a baby is born without a deformity, the chances of avoiding sickness are slim. Of the one million babies born in Russia in 1993, only 9 per cent were completely healthy. The percentage of healthy infants has dropped by almost two-thirds since 1988.

The doctors who treat the sick children say they cannot be sure of the causes of birth defects. "We

can only see that there are noticeably more cases," said Dr. Igor Burkov, a pathologist at Russian Clinical Children's Hospital No. 1, a large hospital in Moscow that treats children from all over the country.

But the doctors, like most medical researchers, are convinced that Russia's widespread industrial pollution is one of the most important reasons for the increase.

"When a woman is pregnant and the child is in formation, there is already something wrong in the child's development," Dr. Palma said. "We can see things wrong with their brain or their spine."

At a Moscow hospital for maternal and child health, the number of birth defects has increased fourfold since 1988. Industrial pollution is believed to be one of the major causes.

"Clearly the air is getting worse, there are all kinds of elements in the water, and the food and medicine is often uncontrolled and unsafe," said Dr. Nikolai Kudashev, the hospital's head of neonatal pathology.

Another factor is the rapid increase in infectious diseases, such as diphtheria, and sexually transmitted diseases, such as syphilis, herpes and hepatitis. All of these diseases, rarely seen in the Soviet era, can cause pregnant women to give birth to sick or deformed babies.

Dr. Kudashev displayed a photograph of an infant with deformities caused by a sexually transmitted disease. At his centre alone there are several cases of hepatitis among newborn infants every month.

Earlier this month, the Moscow newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda reported that dozens of Moscow children have been born with deformities in their spines and limbs, including many born without a forearm.

The newspaper quoted a medical expert, Dr. Gennady Guzeyev, who said the defects could be a result of radiation poisoning or the chemicals and heavy metals contained in pollution from Moscow's factories.

"Industries are using very old and worn-out equipment," the newspaper said. "People are not responsible. They're only trying to enrich themselves."

Dr. Guzeyev said he felt "a great bitterness" because the government doesn't have enough money to research the exact causes of the birth defects.

The overall rate of infant mortality in Russia is twice as high as in North America. More than half of pregnant women are suffering from some kind of disease.

Indeed, Russian mothers are often so weak and sick that they die in childbirth. The number of deaths during childbirth is 10 times greater than the rate in the West.

If they survive the birth, Russian children are confronted by a life of health hazards and economic hardship. As many as 40 per cent of Russian children suffer from chronic diseases. By the end of their 11 years in school the number of chronically sick children will double, and 25 per cent will have defects in their cardiovascular system.

Again, much of this sickness is directly linked to the pollution spewing from Russia's smokestack industries. The level of illness among children living near factories in Moscow, for example, is twice as high as normal. Two-thirds of all Russians are breathing air with five times more pollutants than the recommended limit.

An equally crucial factor is the growing level of poverty in Russia as its post-Communist society becomes polarized between rich and poor. Government budget cuts have slashed the level of children's allowances and child-care leaves.

Dr. Kudashev said he often gives leftover medicine to his poorer patients, because they would otherwise be unable to afford it.

"When you go to look at the kids here every morning, you can see that they are getting fewer vitamins than they need. The mothers aren't getting proper nutrition during their pregnancies."

Almost half of Russian children are lacking the basic necessities of food and medical care, according to a recent Unicef report.

For a typical Russian child, most meals are dominated by bread and potatoes. They suffer from a shortage of meat, milk, fish, fruit and vegetables. The amount of protein in their diet is 25 per cent less than it should be, and they get one-third less than the recommended level of vitamins A and B.

Not surprisingly, about 60 per cent of Russian children are showing signs of rickets and other sicknesses caused by a lack of proper nutrition, another recent report said.

Health officials say they are worried that Russia could be inflicted with permanent damage to its gene pool. Within two decades, if the trends continue, most families will be formed by ill people, one health official has predicted.

"Unless the situation changes for the better, women will be unwilling to have babies because they do not want to doom them to a life of even worse quality than their own," a Russian journalist commented.

The birth rate in Russia has declined drastically in the past decade. There were one million fewer babies in 1993 than in 1985, and the total Russian population is falling at a rate of about one million annually.

The Russian health system, crippled by budget cuts, is unable to cope with the growing number of sick children. Half of Russia's hospitals have no hot water, and thousands have no running water at all. Most doctors are paid less than \$200 a month.

"Doctors are paid as little as street cleaners," Dr. Kudashev said. "Health care is becoming less accessible. The best specialists are working as consultants to the rich."

GEOFFREY YORK

**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 1995 The Globe and Mail Inc.  
<http://www.globeandmail.com>

---

**Source Citation**

"Sickness on the rise for Russian children EPIDEMIC / Industrial pollution believed to be one reason for increase in illnesses." *Globe & Mail* [Toronto, Canada], 24 July 1995, p. A1. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*, [link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A163491318/OVIC?u=txshracd2598&xid=62f0753c](http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A163491318/OVIC?u=txshracd2598&xid=62f0753c). Accessed 21 Feb. 2017.

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A163491318