

# Soviet Psychiatry: Real Progress or Just PR?

*Team of U.S. psychiatrists reports mixed results after visit to controversial Soviet psychiatric hospitals*

SOME PROGRESS, but plenty of room for improvement: that was the final verdict of a State Department-sponsored team of U.S. psychiatrists and officials who traveled to the Soviet Union earlier this year on a mission to evaluate Soviet psychiatric practices. According to the report issued this month, they found that, although there are still instances of psychiatric abuse of political dissidents, some long-closed doors may be opening.

Observers warn, however, that it is too soon to say whether the apparent changes are part of the widespread reforms taking place under the banner of perestroika, or whether they are designed for the more immediate Soviet aim of reentering the World Psychiatric Association (WPA). The official Soviet psychiatric body resigned from the WPA in 1983 in response to heavy international criticism of alleged abuses.

Recently, the Soviets have said they intend to reduce the number of psychiatric inpatients by one third, removing 2 million names from the stigmatizing "psychiatric register," and transfer their Special Psychiatric Hospitals for the criminally insane from the Interior Department to the Ministry of Health. Furthermore, a law was passed last year guaranteeing patients the right to appeal involuntary hospitalization.

But the most striking step was to grant a U.S. delegation permission—sought and repeatedly denied in past years—for a first-hand look at hospitals, patients, and expatriates.

The 26-member group, headed by psychiatrist Loren H. Roth of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, brought a list of 37 patients it wanted to examine but by the time the team arrived in the Soviet Union, 17 had been discharged. Ultimately, there were in-depth interviews with 15 patients and with 12 former patients. Group members also talked to additional patients at a number of hospitals, including three Special Psychiatric Hospitals.

Among the 12 released patients, the delegation found no evidence of any past or current mental disorder in 9, and only mild symptoms in the remaining 3. Of the 15 still hospitalized, most of whom had been diag-

nosed as schizophrenics, the U.S. psychiatrists confirmed that 9 had either schizophrenia or paranoid delusional disorder. They also found that one had bipolar illness (manic depression), a diagnosis rarely made in the Soviet Union. But five were found to have no current psychiatric disorder.

The delegation found as yet few signs that hospital conditions have much improved despite the changes announced by the Soviets. Patients have no knowledge of their rights and the allegedly criminally insane are usually tried in absentia.

Although convicted criminals are no longer being used as orderlies in the special hospitals, delegation members heard many complaints from patients about abusive treatment by the staff, harsh rules, and the punitive use of drugs including sulfazine and atropine, drugs with painful side effects and questionable therapeutic value. The report also describes excessive and inappropriate doses of antipsychotic medication.

At the Ordinary Psychiatric Hospitals, in contrast, conditions are "decidedly more humane and therapeutic," said the group, although psychotherapy is nonexistent.

The Soviet response to the report, delivered on 3 July, is markedly conciliatory, calling the report "a valuable and useful document." Although it quibbles with some findings, it concedes that drugs have been used for punishment in the past and says the health ministry plans to ban the use of sulfazine and atropine in psychiatry. It also agrees that "additional measures are required to protect the rights and lawful interests of individuals." The Soviets also state that the formation of an independent commission to monitor psychiatry within the country is under discussion.

The delegation's trip is regarded as the beginning of what both sides hope will be a reopening of collaborative activities in psychiatry, including a reciprocal visit by a Soviet delegation to the United States. Darrell Regier of the National Institute of Mental Health says the first identified area of common interest is a study of diagnoses and classification of mental illnesses.

The U.S. delegation has asked the Soviets to provide status reports on the patients it

saw, as well as information on 20 additional patients suspected to be hospitalized for political reasons. It has also recommended establishing a formal international body with the authority to investigate alleged psychiatric abuses in any country.

The trip has already produced at least one concrete development: Regier says that since the U.S. team's report was issued, four of the hospitalized patients who were found to be symptom-free by the delegation have been released. The fifth has been transferred from a special to an ordinary psychiatric hospital, the usual prelude to release.

Delegation member Peter Reddaway, political science professor at George Washington University and a stern critic of Soviet psychiatry, warns that all these hopeful-looking developments must be seen within the context of the intense Soviet desire to be readmitted to the WPA, something that could happen at its next meeting in Athens in October. The executive committee of the WPA voted in March to recommend readmission. But the American Psychiatric Association has opposed this, absent clearer signs



**Chief Investigator Loren Roth.**

that the Soviets are changing their ways.

Critics like Reddaway are skeptical that real reform will occur while the two kingpins of Soviet psychiatry, Georgi Morozov and Marat Vartanyan, are still in positions of prominence. Morozov, head of the Serbsky Institute for Forensic Psychiatry, and Vartanyan, director of the All-Union Research Center for Mental Health, were conspicuous by their absence during the U.S. delegation's visit.

Reddaway says a spate of recent newspaper reports in the Soviet Union, which have been unusually frank in discussing psychiatric abuses, could be a sign that the old guard is losing favor. He says one article in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* made a "more or less open call" for the resignation of Morozov and Vartanyan, and he speculates that this may be a prelude to dumping them.

■ CONSTANCE HOLDEN