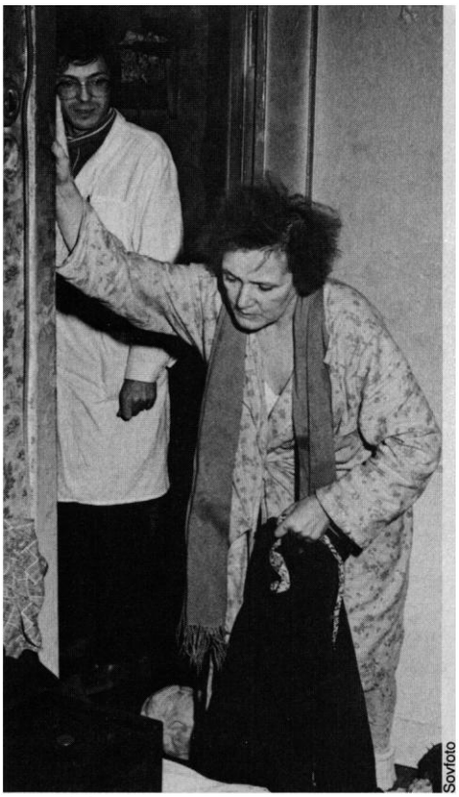
Soviets Seek U.S. Help in Combating Alcoholism

Joint research programs and private exchanges of personnel are being planned after anti-alcoholism drive fails



Cause and effect. *Vodka on sale in a state liquor store (left). Patient being treated in a short-term detoxification center (right).*

FOR 4 YEARS, Soviet authorities have been waging a campaign against alcoholism, only to have a dismal flop on their hands. Now, in desperation, the Soviets are turning to U.S. experts for advice. A group of physicians and biomedical researchers from the U.S.S.R. Academy of Medical Sciences is scheduled to arrive in the United States this week to draw up a plan for a joint research program with the Institute of Medicine. And numerous private groups have been involved in exchanges of personnel and information.

The extent of the Soviet failure was candidly acknowledged by Boris Levin, a sociologist who heads the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences Department of Alcoholism Studies, when he recently addressed a group of American University students in the course of a private visit—his first—to this country. "About this reform, I will not say anything good," he said through a student translator. He explained that the purpose of the reform was to instill "cultured" drinking habits. But, he said, the social drinkers are the ones who have suffered, while alcoholism has been unaffected and, if anything, is getting worse. Levin, who has headed the alcoholism department in the Academy's institute for social research (recently renamed the Institute of Sociology) for two decades, reflects traditional Soviet thinking on the subject of alcoholism, which sees the disorder as primarily social in nature. He thinks Americans put too much emphasis on the "disease model."

But as outside contacts have developed, Soviet scientists have shown a growing interest in exploring the biological aspects of alcoholism. And despite the differences between social and biologically oriented professionals, there seems to be widespread agreement that the policy the government has been pursuing doesn't work.

Levin reported that when Mikhail Gorbachev assumed office in 1985, the anti-alcoholism campaign assumed the highest priority in the Politburo. Three major conferences were held in the first year. Everyone was very optimistic about the reform. But "after that, alcoholism was not discussed at all in the Politburo. . . . The drums and loud instruments were replaced by sad violins—which played at an even louder volume."

What people are saying now, according to Levin, is that "the alcohol revolution drowned in samogen [moonshine]." (Two liters of vodka cost 25 rubles, compared with 1 ruble for 2 liters of samogen.) In 1985, the official estimate of per capita alcohol consumption was 8.5 liters. It fell to 3.2 liters by 1987. But this year, the figure was back at 8.5, half of it moonshine. "This year we expect 1 million people to be arrested" for dealing in samogen, said Levin.

Levin also said that some social controls on drinking that preceded the reform have broken down: for example, some women used to get their husbands to cut down on drunkenness by complaining loudly about them at party meetings. Now the wives keep silent, because drunkenness carries a fine of 500 rubles—much more than an average worker makes in a month.

Levin said the reform, which has included drastic cuts in liquor production, has had two major defects. One is the adoption of "fantastic, unrealistic goals," including the achievement of moderate drinking habits for the entire population within 2 or 3 years. The other is that "administrative bureaucratic methods" were chosen instead of public education. The message was "capitalists are at fault" for alcoholism, "even though drunks don't even know what capitalism is."

Levin said the new sobriety society created to foster the reforms—the All-Union Voluntary Temperance Promotion Society—was composed of 10,000 well-paid bureaucrats with company cars who knew nothing of alcoholism and whose only idea was to close down liquor stores.

He said the campaign has failed to stem worsening trends—alcoholism among women continues to increase, for example (the country reportedly has a bad problem with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome), and "every new generation gets addicted to alcohol at an earlier age." He said the national crime rate, which dipped when drinking was reduced, has risen to alarming new levels.

As for the treatment of alcoholism—which now consists primarily of heavy fines and overnight stays in drying-out centers—

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Levin personally believes that no effective medical approach exists. He asserts that Alcoholics Anonymous is by far the most effective answer. AA used to be in bad odor because it was regarded as a religious organization. Now, however, as officials are coming to see the complexity of the challenge, the formation of AA groups is being encouraged.

A move toward Western-style treatment will probably be long in coming, as one staple, psychotherapy, is virtually nonexistent in the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the Soviets are said to be open to new ideas, and collaborative efforts have been multiplying.

Early this year, as part of an agreement between the Institute of Medicine, the Public Health Service, and the U.S.S.R. Academy of Medical Sciences, an international symposium was held in the Republic of Georgia on alcoholism research, treatment, and public policy. According to several participants, Soviet physicians are keenly interested in the biological and genetic aspects of alcoholism. One observer, psychologist William R. Miller of the University of New Mexico, said they are experimenting with a variety of medical treatments, although they do not appear yet to have proceeded to controlled trials.

The symposium was followed by a meeting in Tblisi to develop a 2-year U.S.–Soviet work plan on alcohol and drug problems. Plans were discussed for further collaboration, including developing techniques for surveying alcoholism and standardizing diagnostic and descriptive terminology.

The first cooperation under the plan is to start this month when a Soviet delegation is scheduled to arrive to work on the development of joint protocols. These will include research on children of alcoholics; on the effects of alcohol on MAO (monoamine oxidase) inhibitors, a type of antidepressant; and on animal models of alcohol addiction.

There have also been a lot of privately sponsored activities. In the past few years, various organizations have sponsored mutual visits by Russian and American treatment experts to each others' facilities; U.S. delegations have gone over to introduce AA to Soviet groups; and several Soviet physicians have attended Rutgers University's International Summer School of Alcohol Studies. What's more, the first joint Soviet-American alcoholism treatment and rehabilitation center was established in Moscow in April by a group called the Soviet-American Conference on Alcoholism.

Soviets, like Americans, are clearly divided over the best approaches for dealing with alcoholism. But, as Levin noted, officials there "are beginning to understand it will take a long time." ■ **CONSTANCE HOLDEN**

Cold Fusion: Smoke, Little Light

A recent workshop on cold fusion seems to have generated more heat than any of the cold fusion cells themselves. Several scientists—including some of the workshop participants—have complained that the meeting, which was sponsored jointly by the National Science Foundation and the Electric Power Research Institute, seems to have been aimed more at influencing funding decisions than answering scientific questions. They are particularly upset that a press conference after the meeting conveyed the impression that there is persistent evidence for the controversial effect (*Science*, 27 October, p. 449).

Other attendees, however, said that the workshop was the most scientifically productive meeting yet on cold fusion. The complainers, they suggested, are merely skeptics irritated that the currently unfashionable subject got some good press.

The most public complaint came from American Physical Society president James Krumhansl in a 27 October letter to Mary Good, chairman of the National Science Board, which oversees the NSF. Krumhansl pointed out that NSF kept the meeting closed and asked participants not to talk to the press, but then held a post-workshop press conference that gave the perception that recent cold fusion findings justify additional research. "Some of the participants in the meeting have told us that they feel these statements [at the press conference] violated the [non-disclosure] agreement and were one-sided and misleading," Krumhansl wrote. He later told *Science* that he was also concerned about NSF's collaboration with an organization that has a vested interest in cold fusion. (EPRI is funded by electric utility companies.)

Indeed, several participants complained to *Science* that the format of the workshop was skewed toward rendering a favorable judgment on the evidence for cold fusion. "Most of the people there were establishing a foundation for funding with the NSF and not a foundation for the science," said Nathan Lewis of Caltech, who has been one of the most vocal critics of the cold fusion claims. Peter Bond of Brookhaven National Laboratory thought that the organizers of the meeting were too optimistic about the claims of cold fusion and that the press conference reflected that. "[The people from] EPRI are firm believers," he said. "They want it to be true and they're going to will it to be true."

Frank Huband, director of NSF's division of electrical and communications systems which sponsored the workshop, defended the closed nature of the meeting. It was by invitation only, as many NSF-sponsored meetings are, so as to include only serious participants and avoid the circus-like atmosphere of previous cold fusion meetings. Huband says he originally tried to invite about one-third skeptics, one-third enthusiasts, and one-third neutrals, but the final attendance was more weighted toward the enthusiasts. The participants were asked not to talk to the press during the meeting, but were free to discuss its contents afterward, he said. And the decision to hold a press conference was forced on him because it was the only way to keep the press out of the workshop itself without forcing a confrontation, he said.

Huband also said he saw nothing wrong with working with EPRI on the meeting. "The utilities are a very pragmatic bunch," he said, and EPRI is unlikely to spend money on cold fusion unless it holds potential for electrical power generation.

But other divisions at NSF, such as the physics division, apparently wanted nothing to do with the workshop. One physicist outside NSF said the physics division was "furious beyond belief" that the workshop took place. Karl Erb, NSF's program director for nuclear physics, said only that his department was convinced that "there was no reproducible evidence of nuclear physics being involved" in the anomalous effects attributed to cold fusion and that he told that to the organizers of the workshop.

Despite all this, several participants said the workshop was the most valuable meeting to date on cold fusion. For instance, Kevin Wolf of Texas A&M University, who has reported finding large amounts of tritium from cold fusion cells, said he picked up some useful information about tritium contamination in palladium. Another attendee, who describes himself as a neutral, said his overall impression from the workshop is that "there is too much there to be ignored." Since this was the overall message of the press conference afterward, he didn't believe it was overblown. What is overblown, he said, is the antagonism some researchers feel toward the possibility that something really is going on. ■ **ROBERT POOL**