

SPECIAL ARTICLE

Cancer wars: reflections of a medical oncologist from a visit to Moscow in 1987

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A recent paper by Glyantsev, Koshelev and Kolesnikov, on the life and achievements of Nikolai Nikolayevich Blokhin (1912–1993) [1], an eminent Russian surgeon and oncologist of the Soviet era, brought memories of a visit, in 1987, to the *All-Union Cancer Research Centre of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Medical Sciences*.

These recollections stem from a scientific exchange programme of a delegation of “Western” oncologists, visiting, under the leadership of Dr Jane C. Wright (1919-2013) [2], what was then Czechoslovakia; Hungary and the USSR. The 22 members of this delegation came from America, Canada, Japan and Europe with six others accompanying the invited delegates.

Several delegates from this group of oncologists had the previous year been to the People’s Republic of China on a similar scientific exchange visit, under the auspices of the People-to-People, Citizen Ambassador Programme [3].

These were the years of Reagan, Thatcher, Deng Xiaoping and Gorbachev. China and the Soviet Union, separated for decades after WWII from the rest of the world, opened their gates to new ideas and visitors from the West. Tensions were resolved or eased and the world was becoming a safer place to live in.

The visit to China in 1986 was an apparent success and the experiment was repeated the following year with countries of the Soviet Block, where glasnost and perestroika had already begun.

Jane Wright, our leader on both occasions, an eminent oncologist and veteran cancer researcher, had been appointed in 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson to the *President’s Commission on Heart Disease, Cancer, and Stroke*. That same year, seven oncologists, including Dr. Wright, the only female member of the group, assembled in Chicago with the intention to establish a new society dedicated to issues unique to clinical oncology. This was the very first meeting of the *American Society of Clinical Oncology* (ASCO). Jane Wright had already been

to Moscow in 1962, attending an international cancer congress.

Our delegation assembled in London, flew to Prague, then to Budapest and from there to Moscow, where we arrived on March 27, 1987; we settled at the Hotel Cosmos, with outside temperatures of -1°C. This hotel complex was built to serve the XXII Summer Olympic Games, held in Moscow, in 1980.

Prague and Budapest, the first two stops of our scientific exchange, have now joined (with Bratislava) the European Union, something utterly inconceivable in 1987, at least to the ordinary man.

This communication focuses briefly on the scientific exchange visit of the delegation to Moscow.

Our schedule included a visit to the *All-Union Cancer Research Centre of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Medical Sciences* (AUCRC), which took place on March 30, 1987. On arrival, we were greeted by Professor B.K. Poddubny, head of the endoscopy unit at the centre [4].

In the Soviet era, each of the 15 Republics of the U.S.S.R. had a cancer centre but the AUCRC was the largest and most advanced establishment, receiving tertiary referrals from all over the Soviet provinces.

Professor B.K. Poddubny demonstrated the use of a Soviet-built YAG-type Laser for the treatment of stenosis arising in the gastrointestinal tract [4]. We also met Dr. Natalia Perevodchikova, head of the chemotherapy department, Dr Kruklova head of the haematology department and Professor N. Androsov, Director of the Radiotherapy department; they briefed us on the treatments routinely applied at the centre, which were essentially no different from those used in Europe and America [4].

Chemotherapy was introduced in the USSR through the direct intervention and work of Nikolai N. Blokhin and his team [1]. Late in the 1950s, the AUCRC had launched sarcolysin, an anti-cancer drug developed through their resident research programme, known also as Melphalan or Alkeran.

The first Director of the AUCRC was Professor and Academician Nikolai Nikolayevich Blokhin who led the Institution for over 30 years [1]. Professor and Academician N. N. Trapeznikov succeeded Professor Blokhin, on his retirement [1,4].

Despite travel restrictions imposed by the Soviet authorities on their citizens, Professor Blokhin had a robust presence on the international scene of oncology having been closely involved in the affairs of cancer organisations of global influence, such as the *International Agency for Research in Cancer* based in Lyons, France, and the Executive Committee of the *International Union Against Cancer* (UICC). He was made President Emeritus of the latter [1].

In addition to his dominant presence in surgery and cancer research, Professor Blokhin was actively involved in the political life of the USSR; he was elected, in 1962, to the USSR Supreme Soviet where, until the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, had acted as Chairman of the Commission for Public Health and Social Welfare [1].

We met Nikolai Nikolayevich Blokhin, on April 1, 1987.

On arrival at the old building of the Academy of Medical Sciences we were greeted at the entrance by Ms Ludmela Meskekova, Professor Blokhin's secretary, who spoke immaculate English even though she had never lived outside the U.S.S.R. [5]. She escorted us to the second floor where Academician Blokhin, the *Patriarch of Soviet Oncology*, as he is now referred to by Glyantsev et al [1], was waiting to meet us. He greeted each delegate individually and we were offered hot tea and chocolate pralines [5].

During our visit Professor Blokhin reminisced of his travels to the USA and recalled his visit to the Children's Hospital in Boston, and his meeting with Dr. Sidney Farber, at Harvard Medical School.

He presented our leader, Dr. Jane Wright, with a commemorative bronze medal of the academy and delegates received a signed copy of the book commemorating the 40th anniversary of the academy [5].

We left Moscow that evening for Leningrad, as St Petersburg was then known, for our next scientific exchange at the Petrov Institute, where its Director, Nikolai Napalkov, had been briefed by Professor Blokhin about our delegation [5].



Figure 1. The delegation in Budapest before departure for Moscow. Front row, 6th from left to right, the Leader of the Delegation Jane C. Wright, one of the seven founding members of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO).



Figure 2. Commemorative badge of the All-Union Cancer Research Centre of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Medical Sciences, presented to the delegates.

As we were settling at our Pribaltiyskaya Hotel in Leningrad that evening, some of us remembered Nikolai Blokhin's final words as we were leaving the academy: "People are good, he said, politics not so good" [5].

With renewed international tensions and the world on a knife edge again, the scientific détente envisaged by the leaders of the nuclear superpowers in the 1980's, should guide today's international leadership and inspire a new coalition for a war against cancer, rather than a war of nuclear annihilation.

The cover page of the 27th January 2018 issue of *The Economist* reads, "The Next War".

In this global climate of mistrust and suspicion, the handshake and parting words of Jane Wright and Nikolai Blokhin on 1st April 1987, achieve these days, a special resonance.

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