

Demographer warns of health catastrophe in Russia

by William Jones

Speaking at a forum sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 9, Georgetown University demographer Dr. Murray Feshbach presented a grim picture of the unfolding health crisis in Russia.

Dr. Feshbach, who has been dealing with Russian issues for more than 25 years, has also edited the *Environmental and Health Atlas* of Russia. His figures represent a devastating indictment of the "shock therapy" policy that was imposed on Russia by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Although many of the current health and pollution problems have their origin in the Soviet period, he said, the immediate cause of the present looming catastrophe is the budget-cutting "reform policy" imposed on Russia by the international financial institutions. "If the federal and territorial budgets are not increased," he warned, "then the outlook is very poor."

The most striking proof of the failure of the reforms under Russian President Boris Yeltsin, is the fact that the Russian population is decreasing by 1 million people a year, a rate of decrease, Feshbach asserted, which will increase, if there is not a rapid change of policy.

Dr. Feshbach's figures clearly show that this "decline" will occur in an environment characterized by the rapid spread of communicable diseases and mental debilitation brought on by disease, as the harbingers of early death for ever-increasing numbers of people. The picture Dr. Feshbach described is well-nigh that of a holocaust brought on by epidemic diseases, which in turn have resulted from the economic and policy decisions imposed on the Yeltsin government by the IMF.

Indeed, if something is not done, the situation will become comparable to the period of the Black Death in Europe during the 14th century, which took half the population of Europe in its wake.

Breakdown of medical infrastructure

Because of the destruction of the medical infrastructure caused by the budget cuts, easily treatable diseases, such as syphilis and gonorrhea, are creating a major health problem. "Untreated, these diseases can lead to gross malformations,

heart disease, and the like," Feshbach said. "And these malformations cannot be cured."

In women, such infections often spread to the Fallopian tubes, thus affecting any children they may give birth to. "I don't believe most of the cases are even observed by the medical profession," Feshbach said. These ailments will in turn lead to brain damage and mental retardation in those infected. Syphilis among girls 10 to 14 years old has increased by 30 times in the last five years. "If infectious and parasitic disease deaths increased in 1996 by 2.9%," Feshbach wrote in a recent article, "I expect that this rate could increase by 10 or more times in the next few years."

With regard to the human immuno-deficiency virus (HIV), which causes AIDS, Russia is at the point where the United States was eight or ten years ago, Feshbach said. "The Ministry of Health estimates that the number of HIV-AIDS cases is on the verge of a major explosion, with a possible 800,000 cases of AIDS. . . . Assuming only one-half of this number is correct," he said, "then the number of deaths will be terrible."

Estimating an average cost of \$10,000 per patient to administer inhibitors AZT and ACTG, translates into a figure of approximately \$7.5 billion which would be needed for treatment of AIDS victims by the year 2000. But, the money is not being provided. "I think all these people will die of the disease," Feshbach stated.

A grim situation for children

The picture is most grim when looking at the situation for Russian children. "Rubella, or German measles, is spreading dramatically," Feshbach said. Pregnant women who contract this disease will give birth to children with birth defects. "Seventy-five percent of all pregnant women have a serious pathology during their pregnancy," he said. Only 37.6% of newborns do not suffer complications in the birth process or in the postpartum period. Anemia in pregnant women, caused by a lack of nutrition, has increased by more than three times in the last five years.

The health of children worsens over the school period. In a recent paper, Feshbach cited a report by the Russian Presidential Commission for Women, Family, and Demogra-