RESEARCH OVERVIEWS

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA—SIBERIAN MEDICAL AGREEMENT
Its history, philosophy and implications for northern medicine

T. A. Mala and Yu. P. Nikitin

University of Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska, USA and Institute of Internal Medicine, Novosibirsk, USSR

The Joint Health Commission of the United States and the Soviet Union met for the first time in eight years in Washington, DC to discuss current and future plans for joint collaboration, not the least of which is the major Alaskan—Siberian Medical Research Program. How did this come about? What is it? Where is it going? What are its implications for northern medical practice?

HISTORY

Nothing could be more natural than for circumpolar health practitioners and researchers to work together. And even more so those who share common borders such as Alaska and Siberia. Alaska and Siberia also share the legacy of having been under the same Czar of Russia, share the same Native peoples and many of the same medical delivery and medical research problems. We even shared the same common cold war which kept us apart from one another for thirty years.

And both countries sharing the Bering Sea, and though at the closest point are but a two mile walk over the ice, could not be farther from one another both politically and in terms of development. While Alaska has grown to a scant half million total population, Siberia has exploded to over thirty five million inhabitants. While Alaska has no factories per se, Siberia has hundreds. While Alaska did small pockets of medical research here and there, Siberia was silently developing major medical research and teaching institutes in its capital of Novosibirsk (population: one and a half million) employing thousands of medical researchers to study nothing but the medical problems of the peoples of the North.

I realized this some years ago having heard of Siberia all of my life from my Eskimo father and my Russian mother. In 1982, I made a trip to Leningrad and through the Soviet Medical Workers' Union, was able to arrange to meet with Leningrad physicians and researchers to ask them for myself: do you think that there is any interest between the USSR and the US for Siberia and Alaska to work together on problems we share in common? The response was a enthusiastic yes! I had my answer and returned to Alaska to pursue the next step.

It is my feeling and observation that most medical researchers and scientists in the world are university based or affiliated. I then rationalized that if I could get the University of Alaska to take on this Program, that it would have a solid base of support and interest and be somewhat protected from the political problems other state and federal agencies face. And furthermore, it fit in with the university statewide mission which addresses the needs of northern peoples including Natives, Long and Short Term Settlers and transients. Next, as a base, it is already interconnected to the various campuses statewide and has access to numerous researchers in different fields.

And furthermore, universities are politically neutral and safe to work with in the eyes of world politics and a natural place for any such politically sensitive international program.

The other reality is that Siberia has been relatively isolated from the west. Most of the Soviet research is done on an international basis out of major research institutes in Moscow. Siberia is somewhat closed and thought as the "back door" to the USSR. In fact, only one international flight a week goes from the west (Japan to Khabarovsk). Ten years ago there were flights from Alaska to Khabarovsk. Today there are none. Most of us that want to visit must still go over the North Pole into Moscow to essentially get permission to fly across the USSR into Siberia... literally across the street from Alaska.
It was then in 1983 that the first University of Alaska delegation went into Novosibirsk led by then Chancellor David Outcalt through the arrangements made by the Soviet Medical Workers' Union. Contact was made and the Siberians were as ecstatic as the Alaskans were to try and develop some kind of working relationship. The stage had been set. Both sides were willing yet how does one make an agreement without precedent? That was the problem. The fact that Alaska is literally on the closed Soviet border makes things all that more complicated for mutual projects.

Several years ago when General Secretary Gorbachev was elected to head his party, I wrote to him and suggested that he might consider helping us allow Alaska and Siberia to work together. He replied to our visiting delegation in Moscow that that is indeed what he wanted to happen and arranged for us to meet with the First Deputy Minister of Health of the USSR, along with the Chairman of the Soviet Academy of Medical Sciences. They both pledged to assist us in developing our plan with Siberia.

Working with Academician Yuri P. Nikitin of the Praesidium of the Siberian Branch of the Academy of Medical Sciences in Novosibirsk, we managed to construct the framework of an Agreement between themselves and the University of Alaska that included four points:

1) to exchange medical information between Siberia and Alaska;
2) to have joint seminars and conferences (the first one in Alaska is planned for Fall of 1987);
3) to evaluate each others research capabilities by exchange visits; and
4) to do joint research projects.

In the summer of 1986, we were notified by the President's Office on US—Soviet Initiatives in Washington, DC that our Agreement with Siberia was one of two placed on the post Reagan—Gorbachev Summit negotiation table after Geneva and that we should come to Washington for the signing of the first US—Soviet exchanges in many years. News of the agreements was covered all over the world and was even featured on the front page of the New York Times. It was decided at that meeting that I would go the next month to Siberia to live for almost two months under the US—USSR Health Scientist Exchange program (under the US Public Health Service) to jointly write the basis for a future program of cooperation between Siberia and Alaska.

On that trip to Novosibirsk, Kharbarovsk, Lenin-grad and Moscow, I was the first westerner to ever be allowed to go into all of the Siberian medical research Institutes, to photograph them and (am in the process of) publish a book about them. This is especially significant insofar as the Siberians have never had any agreement with any western country, state or institution. What resulted in effect was Alaska being named "Siberia's Window to the West". Both Alaskan and Siberians literally held their breath during the signing of the first agreement in November of 1986.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES

After careful deliberation of over 100 Alaskan and Siberian Proposals, seven main areas of work were identified. They are:

I) the Physiological Adaptation of Man to the North;
II) the Mechanisms of the Immune System in the North including Autoimmune Diseases (such as Arthritis and Rheumatism);
III) the Genetics of Alcohol Metabolism in Northerners;
IV) the effects of Chronic Stress in Natives and Newcomers to the North;
V) Nutrition and Health in the North;
VI) the Medical Education of Natives and the Preparation of Medical Specialists for the North and
VII) the Collection and Exchange of Medical Information and Data on the North between Alaska and Siberia.

The idea now is to group as many individuals as possible under the various areas of the agreement and to arrive at some consensus with the Soviets as to joint research and collaboration. It is our objective to have joint research projects conducted in both areas, including some joint expeditions and visits from one side to the other. Not only will data be compared, but methodology and techniques will be standardized and compatible subjects identified.

Alaska does not have the level of sophistication that Siberia has. After all, Siberia has thousands of researchers working in all of their medical institutes and Alaska has but a handful of individuals doing medical research, often much of which is neither coordinated nor results shared between one another. The National Arctic Health Science Policy has attempted to address that point, as have various state and federal commissions on arctic science, but to date not much has been
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The primary mission of this program is to establish a center of excellence in circumpolar health studies at the University of Alaska by means of the exclusive medical research Agreement it has with Siberia. This will be done through various means. First, UA will coordinate and facilitate the meetings of western scientists with their Siberian counterparts in the health sciences area. Secondly, UA will function as a depository for Siberian medical literature.

Thirdly, the program will strive to address the special needs of northern residents as well as those of all circumpolar countries, keeping in mind that we all share the same special climate, environment and other northern related factors. Fourthly, we intend to enhance the medical scientific research aspects of the University which we envision resulting in the recruiting and retention of noted scientists and scholars to Alaska to interact with our scientists and students. This will result in a high level of exposure for existing faculty and bridge the gap between Alaska and other western centers of health science research.

Furthermore we intend to educate the four target groups of individuals that we hope to work with to not only be the object studied, but rather to act as a partner in understanding and assisting in the collection of all data. And finally, to provide a unique contribution from Alaska to the rest of the world by establishing this program as a “model of cooperation” between the United States and the Soviet Union for better understanding through research in the health sciences.

CONCLUSIONS

Every country and nation that shares a common border with the Soviet Union has some kind of relationship with it. Most have some local consulate or embassy to turn to, or at least can approach the border in an effort to work out a situation. Except Alaska. Leaders of both nations need to have more options with which to work with one another in a peaceful manner that is non-threatening and at the same time, mutually beneficial. We feel that the Alaskan—Siberian Medical Research Program meets that need. We furthermore feel that given the number of en-

This statewide University of Alaska Program is based at the Anchorage campus which is charged with developing health programs for the University at large. Researchers and volunteers though are being utilized from all over the state as well as the nation and sites for the actual research are being selected from Alaska at large. It is our intention that the opportunity to participate in this historic work be given to all who wish to participate.

One example of “grass roots” participation is found in the university students who have founded an international circumpolar students club which they are using to write letters to other students from all over the north, including Siberia. By beginning a letter exchange, it is hoped that this will be followed up by a personal visit. The club is now engaged in fund raising activities in anticipation of a three week visit to Siberia in the summer of 1988.

Future tasks of the program include: a joint US—Siberian—Canadian Seminar on northern medical problems to be held in the summer of 1988 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada; collaboration and development of the International Union for Circumpolar Health which will grow as a result of this effort; provide seminars to urban and rural Alaska utilizing the telecommunications systems currently in place in our rural colleges; the organization of an informational network including a newsletter and electronic mail via national and international university databases (such as Bitnet) to inform individuals and institutions on our progress as well as the opportunity to conduct concurrent research with us.

It is felt that there is gross underutilization of electronic media to communicate throughout the circumpolar world and one of our goals is to correct that situation. Once communications are bridged, and we do not have to wait for weeks for data to arrive via the mails, circumpolar research will become an everyday reality, and not something shared in common once every three years during circumpolar health conferences.

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endorsements that we have received from every sector of elected government with which we work, that this is not only an important task for today, but is an investment in the future of the north.

The enthusiasm has even spread to the sister cities and states commissions which are currently working with us to resume direct flights from the Siberian city of Kharbarovsk to the Alaskan city of Anchorage which have been suspended for the past twelve years.

This is truly history in the making. We invite you to be a part of it with us.

Theodore A. Mala, MD, MPH
Program Director
Associate Professor of Health Sciences
University of Alaska
3211 Providence Dr
Anchorage
Alaska 99508
U.S.A.

Yu. P. Nikitin
Professor and Director
of the Institute of Internal Medicine
Vladimirovsky spusk 2a
Novosibirsk 63003
U.S.S.R.