The Alaska-Siberia Medical Program: 24 Years in Retrospect

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Objectives: The purpose of this paper is to give the reader some idea of life in Siberia and Alaska during the creation of our first medical exchanges during the most difficult of political times.

Study design: Various projects were designed using National Institutes of Health (NIH) criteria for our medical exchange.

Methods: As we took these first steps between the Siberian Branch of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR and the Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies at the University of Alaska Anchorage, USA, the general areas of our first studies were: 1) Circadian Rhythm and Work-Related Injuries in the North; 2) Alcohol and its Abuse with Treatment Methodologies; 3) Public Health Administration and Design in the Far East and Alaska; 4) Cystic Echinococcosis in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic; 5) Viral Hepatitis in the Arctic; 6) Cardiology; 7) Nutrition; and 7) Diabetes Prevention.

Results: A film made by the University of Alaska which was shown on PBS' "Breaking the Ice: The Alaska-Siberia Medical Research Program"; various papers and books published on both sides; and a major contribution made to world peace through the medical workers on both sides of the Bering Sea.

Conclusion: This major effort for peace showed the world how the peoples of Siberia and Alaska could come together and work for world peace through joint collaborations. Native people were reunited after years of separation, new avenues were created in anthropology, biology and medicine and, subsequently, the border was again opened between our peoples.

Key words: collaboration, health systems, international health exchange

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to imagine that 24 years have passed since the creation of the Alaska-Siberia Medical Program. It began from a simple idea: to bring the peoples of the North together through medicine. At the time, the Soviet Union was headed by Mr. Leonid Brezhnev. We found ourselves deeply locked in a state of Cold War. It was only through serendipity that there was a conference on environmental health in Alaska and at that conference was a representative, Mr. Vladimir Panchekhin representing the Soviet Medical Workers Union, who turned out to be the key for us realizing our long dream of working for peace and preventing nuclear war through the efforts of medical workers. This first contact came in 1982 and resulted in a visit by myself that year to Finland and St. Petersburg, Russia as a guest of the Soviet Medical Workers Union.

It was at that dinner in St. Petersburg where I was asked the pivotal question of “do you (Americans) really want a nuclear war with Russia?” Needless to say, I was stunned. I knew at that moment that I had to dedicate my life to do what little I could to prevent a nuclear holocaust. I knew that Alaskans felt the same way and that when I was to return home, I would find many like souls who would support me in a grassroots effort to do just that. The rest was history. Through the efforts of Dr. Lydia Novak, Dr. Sergey Krivoschekov, Dr. Yuri Nikitin, the Siberian branch of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR, the Institute of Biology in Magadan, the Soviet Ministry of Health, and Dr. Alexei Lebedev, Minister of Health of Magadan, everyone would join their lives to those of us here in Alaska to make this happen. Mary Core, Dr. Bill Townsend, Chancellor David Outcalt, the Alaska State Legislature and, in particular, Alaska Senators John Binkley and Jay Kerttula, all gave us the initial support to make this dream come true. The NIH, especially the Fogarty International Center, our Alaska Senators Ted Stevens and Frank Murkowski, and Congressman Don Young, all contributed to breaking the ice. Little did I know that this journey would take us around the planet and into the halls of the U.S. Congress and the Kremlin.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was much more than a research program. It brought out the best and worst of all our peoples. For me, the most exciting result was the emergence of a grassroots movement in both countries whose energies brought together scientists, volunteers, politicians, clergy, news reporters and even the FBI and the KGB. And yes, there were even several marriages, divorces, births and deaths during these times. This was all unchartered country. We had no idea of the length, breadth and implications of our actions as each day we found ourselves being educated as to scientific methodologies, political roadblocks, and the nuances of basic funding (including from our own pockets).

There are endless stories that surround the Alaska-Siberia Medical Program. Many are of human interest. One of the first major attempts at scientific exchanges took place in the late 1980s. This was a time when neither side really knew what to expect from the other. Our knowledge of each other’s lands was couched in the context of the Cold War. It seemed to us that the only way we were really going to understand what life was like was to go and visit one another. In an unprecedented move, working with the Ministry of Health of Magadan (which was responsible at that time for the health of all citizens in Chukotka), we were able to charter a Soviet research ship from Vladivostok, which we sailed to Nome where we picked up 40 Alaskan medical personnel and an additional 40 Alaskan biologists. It was on that journey that we crossed the Bering Sea and sailed to the port of Provideniya. Once we arrived, we were split into various working groups which traveled to all regions of Chukotka. On this historic journey, these 80 Alaskans were to stay in the homes of many Soviet citizens, both Native and non-Native, and not only
conducted harvesting of scientific samples, but also made friends for life. The Magadan Institute of Biology coordinated the biological harvesting. The Magadan Ministry of Health coordinated many hospital and public health visits, which also included a hands-on visit with the medical team headed by Dr. Larissa Abrutina to a reindeer herders’ camp. Dr. Abrutina is a Native doctor from that region and later went on with Senator Evdokia Gaer to become one of their nation’s Native leaders advocating for better health for Native peoples.

Within the Soviet Union there were a number of firsts that resulted from this effort. When the University of Alaska delegation visited Moscow and Siberia, we were allowed to be among the first foreigners to mingle and address the many medical scientists there. It was in complete incredulity that they listened to my words with disbelief that scientists and programs would be allowed to freely visit Alaska and work with our people as well as reciprocal visits to Russia. This occurred when the new head of the Soviet Union took office. His name was Mikhail Gorbachev. I remember being told with great reverence by party officials that he said he wanted “Alaska and Siberia to work together.” His words alone opened many doors on the Russian side.

It was through a U.S.-USSR Health Scientists Fellowship from the NIH Fogarty International Center that I was allowed to live in Novosibirsk for two months and work at the various institutes of the Siberian Branch of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR and, subsequently, identify joint collaborations with Academician Yuri Nikitin, Academician Kaznachiev, Professor Sergey Krivoshekov, Professor Kolesnikov and Academician Constantine Sedov. Patricia Cochran and Nancy Edl gave much of their lives to this effort, as did Katherine Gottlieb, now president of Southcentral Foundation in Anchorage. With time our work took us to these cities and villages of Russia: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Khabarovsk, Magadan, Anadyr, Providinaya, Bilibino, Yakutia, Irkutsk, Lake Baikal, the villages of Chaplino and various reindeer herding encampments. There were other places that we visited in the Russian Far East that had never seen a foreigner.

RESULTS
The International Union of Circumpolar Health (IUCH) was born. With many hours of work with Dr. Jens Peder Hart Hansen of Denmark, who became the first IUCH president, Academician Yuri Nikitin, the first secretary, and myself as the first secretary general.

CONCLUSIONS
This was a grassroots effort by peoples of goodwill that ultimately resulted in each of us doing our part to end the Cold War. Once ordinary people got together to meet one another and see that we were all essentially the same humans, then many years of fear and misinformation instantly went away. Many Soviet delegations came to visit Alaska and saw firsthand how we lived in our cities and our villages. Today Native peoples go across the Bering Sea and visit with their relatives as they share family and subsistence with one another.

There were not any great scientific medical discoveries that came out of this program. Yes, we did many comparisons of our climate and adaptation and learned more about each other as individuals and human beings. I think that the greatest result of all our efforts was our little contribution to help end the Cold War. The Soviet Union’s Ministry of Health picked our program to be among the first official exchanges after the Cold War. This appeared on the front page of the New York Times and only two universities were chosen to participate in these first exchanges: the University of Alaska Anchorage and Columbia University. We had invested many years making many trips and meeting many people at all levels. We mutually gained trust with one another which I believe made the world a safer place to live. Native families were reunited and friendships were formed for life.

The meeting of the IUCH in Siberia of 2006 was a tribute to those many early years of extreme hardship and very difficult politics in another world. Today, there is great reason for hope not only in the Circumpolar Health Union but also in the credible memories and friendships that have remained for years. The Tsar’s Russia was once the dominant political force in Alaska. There are many remnants of the Russian American Trading Company and especially the presence of an alive, vibrant, and growing Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska. Saints and madmen have all walked these lands. Siberia and Alaska will always have a great bond not only in history, but also in the blood of our Native peoples. It is more than a romantic notion but rather a physical reality. The Circumpolar Health Conference in Novosibirsk was living proof of the strong bonds between our peoples. It is our hope and prayer that the seeds we planted 24 years ago will grow and prosper in the generations to come.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
It is physically impossible to acknowledge the many brave and loving souls that have made this program succeed. On the Alaska side, it resulted in the foundation of the Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies. The IUCH has proven itself to be a world leader in concerns of the Arctic. The founding idea behind the Union was a simple concept of if you look at the planet, our world, from a point of view over the North Pole, you will observe the countries around it and hence, the name “circumpolar” or “around the pole”. Observing the Circumpolar regions from outer space, one sees that there are no geopolitical lines in reality that one observes on political maps. One observes birds, animals, fish, and all forms of life across these man-made borders without restriction. It is only humans who have imposed these artificial boundaries. So as a result of the founding of the Union, these polar countries have come together to work for the good of all mankind. These include Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Greenland, Russia, Alaska, and Canada.

Early leaders included Dr. Earl Albrecht, Dr. Fred Milan, Dr. Henrik Forsius, Dr. Brown are fold, Dr. Johann Axelsson, Dr. Brian Postel, Dr. Jens Peder Hart Hanson, Dr. Bent Harvald, Dr. Henrik Forsius, Dr. Yuri Nikitin, Dr. Sergey Krubeshekov, Academician Vlail Kaznacheev, Academician Constantine Sedov, Academician Yuri Borodin, Academician Kolesnikov,
Magadan Health Minister Alexi Lebedev, Magadan Biology Institute Director Asilbeck Aidaraliev, and many others.

Let me ask forgiveness of those whom I have overlooked by name. There were literally hundreds of unspoken heroes on both sides. It was a work of science, medicine, and most of all, of love. You know who you are and you know what you did. History might not remember your name but I assure you that future generations of our children and grandchildren will build on this foundation you have made for all humanity.

To all of you who shared our journey, I thank you with all my heart and will remember you always.

REFERENCES
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