



# AMERICAN AND SOVIET DENTAL CARE IN A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

## AMERYKAŃSKA I RADZIECKA OPIEKA STOMATOLOGICZNA W KONTEKŚCIE HISTORYCZNYM

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### ABSTRACT

By using the example of a charity dental clinic for immigrants from Russia organized by American dental students in 1990, the article briefly examines the history of dental care in the Soviet Union. Largely run by state, the dental care was widely available but suffered from low quality, leading to a population characterized by poor dental health. The article hints at the opposite issue developing in the United States, where despite high quality dental care, many individuals could not and still cannot afford necessary dental procedures.

KEYWORDS: dental care, historical context.

### STRESZCZENIE

W artykule omówiono historię opieki stomatologicznej w Związku Radzieckim na przykładzie charytatywnej kliniki dentystycznej dla imigrantów z Rosji zorganizowanej przez amerykańskich studentów stomatologii w 1990 roku. W dużej mierze opieka dentystyczna prowadzona przez państwo była szeroko dostępna, ale miała niską jakość. To prowadziło do złego stanu uzębienia w społeczeństwie. Artykuł porusza także temat nieco innej sytuacji rozwijającej się w Stanach Zjednoczonych, gdzie pomimo wysokiej jakości opieki stomatologicznej wiele osób nie mogło i nadal nie może pozwolić sobie na niezbędne zabiegi dentystyczne.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: opieka stomatologiczna, kontekst historyczny.

In the summer of 1990, a group of dental students from prominent American universities, Tufts and Boston University, organized a free dental clinic for children of Russian emigres who had arrived in the United States. After the fall of communism, a wave of former Soviet citizens abandoned their crumbling homeland for what they hoped would be a better future abroad. In addition to Israel or Europe, many chose the United States as their destination, searching for their own version of an American dream. Leaving former Soviet Union and many of its now independent republics, these emigrants were able to take only a few carefully chosen possessions. But as the charitable dental students soon realized, the new emigrants also carried bodily mementos of their former lives—particularly in their mouths.

While delivering some impressive scientific innovations, like the space program and nuclear energy, Soviet Union largely failed to increase standards of living, and by 1980s, fell considerably behind the more developed and increasingly comfortable West. However, the state continued to provide universal healthcare system largely free of charge to its citizenry. Unfortunately, its quality was often uncertain and its dental care could only be described as questionable. Upon examining their little patients, the students were forced to divide them into

distinct groups based on the urgency of cases—from the few children who only needed some routine work to these who required an immediate and extensive treatment. The idea that a child may need serious dental work, including tooth extraction, seems shocking in a country where approximately 14% of adults, thanks to the culture of prevention, experience the first cavity only in their mid-thirties [1].

If the physical legacy of communism could be measured in terms of damage it inflicted on human bodies, then Vladimir Sadovsky, vice president of the Russian Dental Association, said it best. In an interview, Sadovsky stated that in 1991, an average person in mid-thirties had between 12 to 14 teeth that required dental work or removal [2]. Ironically, even with this discouraging record, Soviet Union did accomplish some important improvements when it came to dental health of their citizens. According to historical studies, on the eve of the Russian Revolution, the troubled Romanov Empire had only 4,900 trained dentists, mostly concentrated in the European part [3]. The post-revolutionary regime attempted to address the colossal need by training a large number of so called “three-year dentists.” Deployed throughout the country, these often-undertrained technicians could perform only rudimentary procedures.

Nevertheless, between 1918 and 1936, they managed to provide the first form of dental care and a considerable relief to countless Soviet citizens.

After the WWII, the three-year dentists were replaced by dental professionals, expected to finish a full course of study before receiving their diplomas. All medical professionals worked under the state patronage, receiving work assignments, and necessary supplies from directly from the state. For this reason, as the recently declassified report on the state of the Soviet dental system in early 1960s indicates, the quality of equipment and materials was generally poor even if the training seemed adequate [4]. Like most professionals employed in planned economy, Soviet dentists had little incentive to perform well and forced to rely on obsolete technologies, often did not even had a chance to do so. Pain management was virtually nonexistent and most procedures were performed without Novocain. Without access to radiography, dentists operated on assumptions about the nature of the problem and their patients' feedback. Because of the shortage of supplies, natural material such as gold was often used, resulting in a cliché golden tooth, well known throughout Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia. The outcome of these policies was a generation of Soviet citizens with an acute dental phobia, coping privately with their issues and showing up at a local dental clinic only when the pain became unbearable.

In this situation, one could consider the immigrant children lucky. The Tufts and Boston University students treated their little patients with due care and diligence, observing all of the principles of pediatric stomatology that mandated pain management and sensitive attitude to prevent the formation of adverse attitudes. However, already victimized by the shortcomings of the Soviet system, these newcomers were about fall victim to another medical bureaucracy. The free dental clinic that provided treatment constituted a temporary, charity-based solution to the twin problem of the lack of dental insurance and a high cost of dental treatment. While in Soviet Union, the low-quality dental care was widely accessible, being essentially seen as a right of

every citizen, in the United States, the high quality dental care was increasingly becoming a luxury for those without solid, middle-class jobs. With time, this issue became only more acute with recent studies suggesting that approximately 40% adults needing dental care tend to forgo appointments due to high cost [5].

The volunteers' attempt to impress the importance of prevention went beyond teaching better dental habits. Giving away pamphlets, free toothbrushes, and unknown in the Soviet Union, dental floss, the future dentists were trying to equip the new immigrants with cost-effective substitutes for the comprehensive dental care lacking in their new homeland.

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