

The Health of Yakut Women

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In the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), in northeastern Russia, women are more than half of the population. The majority of them (55 percent, or 285,648 people (Goscomstat—State Committee of Statistics, 1999) are women of reproductive age, between 18 to 49.

Women and children respond sensitively to changes in the social, economic and public life of the country. This response manifests itself mainly in their health, reproductive behaviour, and the quality of health of their children. Thus the state of women's health serves as a real indicator of conditions of a society.

This is an unfavourable demographic situation, especially as we have increasing abnormalities in pregnancy and labour among women in Yakutia. These negative changes, in turn, are undoubtedly connected with factors that affect regions throughout the republic, with the bio-social situation worsening due to the effects of the natural-climatic environmental factors. Real anxiety is being caused by the lack of fruit and vegetables in winter and spring time, which has unfavourable consequences for the health of girls, pregnant women and nursing mothers. Specific scientific investigations reveal vitamin deficiencies in the diets of pregnant women. In many cases, such deficiencies are combined with iron deficiencies that tend to increase with age. The unsatisfactory condition of women's diets leads to a high level of miscarriages

during pregnancy and to stillborn babies. Other consequences include increases in the rates of anaemia among pregnant women by 4.5 times over the last five years, in cases of urinary system disease by 2.5 times. The number of abnormal deliveries demonstrates that the health conditions among women are becoming aggravated. The percentage of births without complications over the past three years has dropped from 45 percent to 35.8 percent (and to just 31.8 percent in the Russian Federation) of live births.

With respect to disturbances of human reproductive health, a definite role is played by the conditions under which a person works. There is no doubt that the birth of healthy children is connected with this. Among women who work under unfavourable conditions (low temperatures, heavy labour, etc.), the complications of pregnancy appeared twice as often as in those women who work under more favourable conditions. There are 5,576 women with jobs that do not meet the sanitary-hygienic requirements of safety standards, and 337 women who are employed in fields requiring hard labour. Especially difficult working conditions are faced by women who work in the agricultural sector, which is connected to low levels of mechanization and automatization.

The increase in the number of pregnancy risk factors is related to ecological conditions, and the fact that chemical pollutants used in industry are accumulated not only in the environment but in people's bodies. This is perhaps responsible for the increase of complicated pregnancies. This is the highest rate in the world, including Russia. For the most part, the abnormalities are a result of extragenital pathologies that are, in most cases, caused by chronic infectious diseases. Such diseases are also indicators of the weakening of the immune systems in human beings. These negative phenomena are occurring not only in the areas of industrial and mining developments but in rural areas as well.

It is natural to suppose that the natural-climatic factors can negatively

affect the reproduction of a population. One can assume that, even without taking into consideration the technogenic factors of ecological unbalance, natural and climatic factors always impose an expressed selective influence upon the human reproductive process. The female reproductive system is highly sensitive to the effects of unfavourable environmental factors. Sex cells and embryos at the early stages of their development are the first to react to harmful effects. Thus, indices of female reproductive health are able to reflect fully and adequately the conditions of the environment.

We think that another reason for the deterioration in women's health is the lack of orientation to and stimulation of interest in healthy ways of life in the national mentality itself.

Up-to-date medical care for women of all ages, not just those of child-bearing years is a key factor in improving women's health. In Sakha (Yakutia), obstetrical-gynecological care is vested in a network of preventive treatment establishments, which include medical aid stations, district hospitals, maternity consultation bureaus, maternity homes, and gynecological departments of clinics. The department of obstetrics can admit 785 patients, where 127 beds are for women who are experiencing abnormal pregnancies. There are 31.9 obstetrical beds per 10,000 fertile women (it is 25.2 for all of Russia), and 12.69 gynecological beds per 10,000 (it is 12.6 for all of Russia). The demand for obstetricians and gynecologists is met at a rate of 68.3 percent (229 doctors), the provision per 10,000 females is 5.2 (it is 4.9 for all of Russia).

In comparison, the demand for obstetricians is met at a rate of 82.4 percent. The degree of qualifications for the experts based at the mother and child health protection services has increased.

The opening in 1997 of the Center for Protection of Motherhood and Childhood in Yakutsk, which consequently joined the National Center of

Medicine (NCM), played a great part in the qualitative improvement of obstetrical and gynecological aid in our republic. This is a medical establishment of a new type, where successive medical care is given to pregnant women and newborns, and where all types of treatments are given, from prenatal diagnostics and treatment to obstetrics and nursing of newborn and premature babies at a higher level with modern equipment for diagnosis and treatment. The Center has a clinic of obstetrics, gynaecology and perinatology, which can admit 170 patients, as well as a pediatric clinic for 277 patients and polyclinical departments for 800 patients. Modern perinatal technologies and techniques are being introduced, thus allowing for rational follow-up with respect to pregnancy and birth, and the prevention of labour complications for the mother, foetus and newborn.

The technology associated with obstetrics has greatly changed due to a revision of the delivery technique extension in the number of caesarian section operations, as well as to the reduced use of obstetrical instruments that could be potentially damaging to the foetus, and the introduction of modern techniques into intensive therapy. Perinatal diagnostics services, provided by the medical-genetic consultation bureau of National Center of Medicine, are expanding. Great work is being done with the creation of a system for ultrasound screening of pregnant women, foetus and newborns. With the development of medical-genetic and family planning services, and the introduction of the prenatal diagnostic technologies, the numbers of defective children and the mortality rate have decreased. In addition, to reach the goals of the "Family Planning" program and to improve the demographic situation in our republic, a human reproduction consultation bureau has been established, where new methods for diagnosing and treating infertile people have been introduced. The 60-bed neonatal department has been permitted to develop reanimation and intensive therapy services.

The various improvements in obstetrical services in our republic cannot, however, hide the obvious problems in providing medical care to women. It is necessary to revise many customary but obsolete principles of work so as to improve female health indices, to use available resources more efficiently, and to increase economic efficiency and to stimulate adaptation to the market economy, so that we may provide medical care to everybody, especially to women whose living conditions are poor.

Preventative medical programs for women of all age groups are particularly urgently required. Preventive measures, in the broad sense of the word, include influencing as many of the factors affecting the health (e.g., way of life, diet, working conditions, etc.) as possible. The effects of northern environmental factors can be diminished by preventive methods.

One of the main mechanisms of the mother and child protection strategy is purposeful federal and republican programs. The "Family Planning" program, which has been in operation since 1995, is of special interest. The Health Protection Ministry of the Sakha Republic co-operates with the United Nations. Two family planning offices have been opened in two Arctic districts (*uluses*) of the republic. The republic's "Safe Maternity" program has been in place since 1997, permitting the development of additional measures of state support to families and mothers, the improvement of the medical staff training system and of the quality of medical assistance and organization due to the introduction of updated perinatal technologies.

To begin to resolve the medical-social problems that characterize the peripheral regions of Russia, and to achieve the protection of reproductive rights and female health, it is necessary to do four things. First, we must expand the delivery and content of the "Family Planning," "Safe Maternity," and "Children of the Arctic" programs. Second, we must encourage activities that promote healthy lifestyles so that people can, to a great extent, control,

improve and answer for their own health and to introduce, through the mass media, more educational programs devoted to a healthy lifestyles based on indigenous people's traditions. Third, we must develop laws that provide protection for reproductive health and rights, for the institutions of motherhood and fatherhood, thus encouraging responsible parenting. And fourth, we must improve the quality of the ambulatory-polyclinic examination of women by means of raising the qualifications of the medical staff and the further introduction of updated perinatal technologies.

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