



Personal View

The Chernobyl Accident — A Personal Perspective

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A scientific research project can only answer certain questions. The epidemiological study, in which I had the honour to participate, has answered the basic question that exposed the myth about the radiological consequences resulting in psychological and psychiatric disorders in children born into the families of Chernobyl evacuees. However, the spectrum of emotions, fears and deliberate abuse inherent to post-Chernobyl Ukraine was beyond the scope of our scientific papers. It goes without saying that masterly whistling a Beethoven symphony may give an impression of the melody, but the symphonic orchestra performance will make it possible to hear and recognise the power of the great music. I hope that my humble attempt at a non-scientific analysis will help you to better understand what happened and, unfortunately, still happens in my country.

The Soviet Union was still alive in 1986. Two hundred million of its citizens were satisfied with the rudimentary freedoms allowed by a totalitarian regime. One of these was listening to 'hostile' broadcasting in Russian and our own national languages. Although the special services used to jam radio broadcasts, many Soviet citizens listened to this only source of alternative information. This is how the citizens of the USSR first knew about a serious accident at the nuclear power plant not far from Chernobyl, a small town in the north of Ukraine. The Soviet mass media did not, however, confirm this information.

Several generations of Soviet people had been deprived of true and full information and never believed their mass media. They trusted the rumours, passed by word of mouth, rather than the information presented on State radio and television programmes. These were the rumours, based on the information coming from jammed radio broadcasts from abroad, that became the main source of anxiety for people living close to (within a few hundred kilometres of) Chernobyl. This anxiety was enhanced by the unwillingness

of official Soviet propaganda to give at least some facts to the population shortly after the accident. There was also another alarming signal: Mikhail Gorbachov, the political leader at the time, had completely disappeared from television screens.

Later, the Soviet ideologists realised that the truth about the accident could not be hidden. The first official news about the accident was typical of the Soviet mass media: the recognition of the fact that an 'insignificant accident' had occurred was followed by appeasing statements regarding the absence of any danger and victims, and of some insignificant damage. At the same time, thousands of young men who had already been conscripted into the Soviet army were suddenly mobilised (usually by night) and sent to the newly arranged campgrounds near the nuclear plant. The dosimeters were only handed to some of them, mainly to army officers and army surgeons. However, these appliances were defective. At last the leaders of the medical services of the State appeared on the television screens, but they still did not speak about the danger of radiation exposure and the ways of mitigating its effect. The Minister of Health Protection of the USSR in his interview gave a wise recommendation to keep windows closed ... and nothing more!

The panic increased. The Minister of Health Protection of Ukraine publicly presented another thesis: 'the more radiation — the better health'. I was working as a paediatrician at that time; the doctors had no detailed information; small amounts of knowledge garnered from the university short course in radiation medicine were hardly sufficient. After work I used to visit the academic medical library to find at least some answers ... there were no serious scientific papers on the subject. In fact, these papers did exist, but most Soviet doctors could not read them without special permission from the KGB.

The panic reached its peak in the first days of May. Thousands of Kiev residents stormed railway ticket offices in an attempt to take their children away from Kiev, away from Ukraine, to relatives, friends or acquaintances. Many

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years later, a high ranking KGB officer told me that at the beginning of May he had only realised that his own children were at a danger, because he was performing a secret operation — evacuating the children of top Communist Party management from Kiev.

It was evident that the authorities were not to be trusted, all of them, including the medical ones. Unofficial sources were the only provider of true information. Official information was poor, unreliable and irritating. There were reports of incidents when residents of Kiev openly avoided children evacuated from the disaster area. Because of a lack of adequate professional information, the Ukrainian doctors often equated the ill-health of children to the effect of exposure to low doses of radiation. Because of the complete absence of real dosimetric measurements, it was actually impossible to dispute this assertion.

After the collapse of the USSR and the gain of independence for Ukraine in 1991, the medical and scientific authorities dramatically changed the emphasis of their presentations in the mass media. Suddenly, without any properly conducted studies, they reported a significant impact of low-dose radiation on the health of the population. This low level of radiation exposure caused everything: eye diseases, gastrointestinal impairments, cardiovascular pathologies and even psychiatric disorders. Dissertations were presented; the 'discoverers' of the phenomena made impressive academic and managerial career moves. The Chief Psychiatrist of the Ministry of Health Protection of Ukraine stated that 30% of the Ukrainian population ran the danger of dementia resulting from low-dose radiation. Another 'researcher' from the newly established unit of post-Chernobyl psychiatry explained that the rise in the schizophrenia rate was due to exposure to radiation, although no rise in schizophrenia had actually been recorded.

Unlike some medical professionals, Ukrainian sociologists demonstrated common sense and scientific

impartiality. Unfortunately, their papers were only published in specialised journals and were therefore unlikely to influence public opinion. The Kiev sociologist Natalia Panina denounced the phenomenon of radiophobia. She defined it as a deliberate attempt to interpret the normal and natural fear experienced by many humans in conditions of lack of information as being the result of a pathological process.

Unfortunately, even today, in 2011, in Ukraine there have been no serious analytical studies on the development of various radiation myths. In private conversations, many Ukrainian top officials admit that they understand the origin of post-Chernobyl stigma, but they do not dare speak about it in public, as this could affect their own political rating, or that of their party. The only serious article about this specific social phenomenon, and the causes and conditions of its development, were presented by the former Officer of Radiation Reconnaissance, Sergey Mirny.

Today, hundreds of thousands of citizens are officially recognised to be the so-called 'victims' of Chernobyl. The status gives them some small privileges. Some political leaders exploit the feelings and fears of these people, particularly during election campaigns. However, most of the so-called 'Chernobyl victims' did not all take part in the clean-up of the Chernobyl accident, nor were exposed to radiation. There are reports of numerous cases of corruption in the procedure that resulted in the issue of Liquidator Certificates. Those who are truly suffering from the after-effects of the Chernobyl accident tend not to participate in political action and disputes.

It should also be noted that none of the Ukrainian pseudo-researchers who speculated on various parascientific myths has so far been divested of scientific titles or high managerial positions. Let us hope that they have learnt the error of their ways and would now support a true scientific assessment of the health risks of the Chernobyl accident.