

# Soviet hospitals shock child-care experts

IT IS cattle-market obstetrics, according to Sheila Kitzinger, anthropologist and child-care specialist, who was describing what she had just seen of the Soviet way with childbirth in Moscow National Health hospitals.

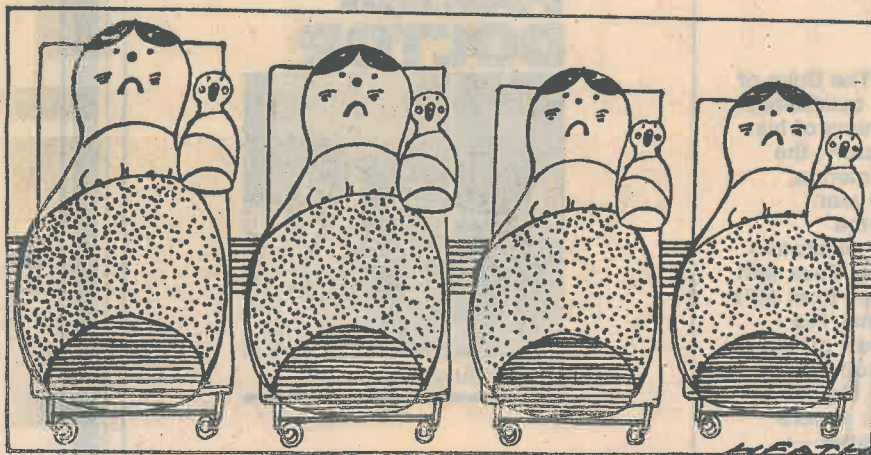
Wendy Savage, senior lecturer in obstetrics and gynaecology at the London Hospital, was with the same group of British doctors and specialists. She agreed that on this evidence the Russians were 25 years or more behind Britain — she was reminded of an article in the *Lancet* in the 60s by paediatrician Norman Morris about human relations and obstetrics, “where he talked about women being left alone and the abrupt manner of midwives”.

Women she had seen in the Moscow hospitals were just “bodies on the bed. The babies were forcibly removed from them. To us it was quite horrific, because we’ve mostly forgotten how that was in Britain”.

She described a Caesarian section in Moscow when “a huge paediatrician (male) like a bear” ignored British suggestions that the mother might like to see the new baby. Instead, “he picks it up in one hand, throws it into the incubator and wheels it out”.

Sheila Kitzinger says of the same delivery: “He let us see the baby for a moment, but the mother didn’t see it, although she had had epidural anaesthesia. The handling of the new-born is very violent.” She added: “And women are shaved — bald as boiled eggs.”

Savage commented: “That’s what we used to do. I remember the feeling as



*WILLIAM MILLINSHIP reports on the Soviets' "outdated, cruel" obstetric practices.*

the hair grew back — itchy, itchy, itchy for ages.” Kitzinger reports seeing a new-born Russian child turn blue after being washed under a cold tap. She has learned that the Soviet perinatal death rate is 22 per thousand, compared with 9.7 in Britain.

Speaking with great warmth and expressive gestures, Kitzinger described how Russian women laboured on narrow beds in communal rooms behind “great big windows, as if in a shop window. The staff and visitors like us can just watch women in agony, writhing around on the beds and screaming. You see a nurse or midwife pat them on the arm and say what looks like ‘It’ll soon be

over — shush.’ The message, I suppose, is: ‘Be a good girl, don’t let Russia down.’

“Then, when they go into the second stage of labour, they move to a high delivery table, flat on their back, with just a little cushion under head and shoulders. And they are told: ‘Push, push, come on, Irina, push.’ As soon as the midwife or doctor, usually a woman, can get her hands on the baby, it is forcibly extracted. There is no question of a baby swimming out of a woman’s body.”

After a normal birth, the baby is shown to its mother just long enough for her to see its sex. Then it is taken away

while she recovers — usually in a corridor. “You see pale-faced, sad-looking women lying absolutely still with ice-packs on their tummies — the idea is that the ice will make their uterus contract.”

The baby is treated, Kitzinger said, speaking as an anthropologist, as if it is the property of the hospital until certain rituals have been performed. “I think the raw little creature that has just emerged is not regarded quite as a human being. It’s only when the mother has waddled it under a nurse’s supervision that the baby becomes a person. Until then it’s handled very much like a hunk of meat.”

The visitors were dismayed at how long Russian mothers had to wait before they were allowed to hold their babies: two to four hours after a normal birth, several days after a Caesarian. Savage, who had spoken to Russian women about this, had no doubt that they would have preferred to have their new-born babies with them. “Women are the same. Russian women are not different. Our midwives in the 50s used to say: ‘Mothers are too tired after labour, they’d must prefer their babies to be in the nursery.’”

Was there any sign of a Russian women’s revolt? Kitzinger said: “It’s quite obvious thing are going to change, but at the moment I don’t get any sense of an emerging woman’s movement. It’s been a terribly closed society for many years. Women don’t know what is possible.” □

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Garner