

American vs. Communist Medicine

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My First Trip to an American Hospital

After my arrival in America from communist Romania, my in-laws decided that I had suffered enough, and my tonsils needed to be removed. I was frightened, and I thought I was going to die. I had never been admitted to an American hospital before, and I did not know what to expect. I had heard hospital horror stories under communist medical care, and I saw the results of Romanian surgical skills hopping on crutches, deformed, maimed, or worse, in graves.

I frequently had tonsil infections growing up. I was given so much streptomycin that I am still surprised that I can see, hear, and smell. Moving to a different climate, subtropical, extremely humid and hot, created challenges that my body was unable to fight off very well and exacerbated any symptom I had previously had. I was plagued by more infections and severe nose bleeds from allergies to plants and flowers unknown to my immune system.

Instead of being glad to be going to a hospital, I felt that I was going to the scaffold. I had asked my husband to buy me a meal at Kentucky Fried Chicken. It was the only food that somewhat resembled the fried chicken I ate in Romania, and, if I was going to die, I wanted to have comfort food as my last meal. He refused, since surgical patients cannot not eat and drink hours before surgery. My escort was laughing all the way, having a good time at my expense.

We did have insurance, but the hospital was going to kick us out shortly after the procedure unless complications developed.

It was 1978 America, and everything seemed like a luxury hotel, not a hospital. The friendliness of the admission personnel and staff in general was a sharp contrast to the insulting rudeness and carelessness of the Romanian medical corps. The bed was clean and comfortable, and I did not have to bring my own sheets. I had my own room, nurses checked on me every so many minutes, the doctors were friendly and knowledgeable, they did not reuse needles and bandages, and I had my own bathroom in the room. The walls had been freshly painted in a “cheerful” gray. Even so, it beat the Romanian hospitals where layers of paint from World War II were still chipping everywhere, revealing water, rust, and blood stains. And the floors there were a mosaic of dubious marks.

I had a TV in my American hospital room! Imagine that! Under communism, we had to wait until 12th grade in Romania in order to have a black-and-white TV with two channels playing mostly communist propaganda. And our telephone there was connected 14 years after my daddy applied to have one installed.

It was lunchtime, the aroma of cooked food was everywhere, and I thought, “Great, they are bringing my last meal.”

Slightly drowsy and feeling no pain, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I gave my husband my last wishes before they put me to sleep, firmly believing that I would not wake up again as I was counting backwards from 10. I had written a good-bye letter to my parents. In typical independent young person fashion, I had not told them that I was having surgery—I did not want them to worry unnecessarily—there was nothing they could have done since I was 7,000 miles away.

I woke up in the recovery room, fire in my throat, and I thought, “Oh, I did not go to heaven; I must be in hell, as it hurts so badly.” There were some angelic faces in a bright light telling me to wake up; the surgery is over. I closed my eyes and wished it all to go away. I spied a beautiful bouquet of flowers next to my bed, sent by my friend Lois, and I really thought I had died. But every time I swallowed my saliva, a volcanic burn enveloped my throat. I asked for water and they brought me ice. I was shocked since I remembered my little cousin Rodica having the same surgery and being given hot tea. I was offered ice, ice cream, and slimy Jell-O. Rodica was in misery for weeks; it was probably the hot tea causing her a slow and painful recovery. Ice cream felt like a miraculous cure.

Romanians and Europeans in general are convinced that cold drinks cause sore throat and stomach cramps. That is why everything served there is at room temperature. Waiters look disapproving if customers ask for ice and pointedly bring only a cube or two. A doctor performing a tonsillectomy there would never give ice or ice cream to a patient—not when I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s.

There were no complications, and I was sent home the next day. I called my parents to tell them about my brief encounter with American medical care. They were incredulous about my descriptions—they thought I was delirious from my surgery and was describing an expensive hotel. Until my mother saw the inside of an American hospital with her own eyes, she never believed me. She said that socialized medical care standards in Romania were still 50 years behind.

Communist Medical Care

Rationing of everything was a staple of daily life in Romania. We could only have so much before we turned into a bourgeois society, and we had to be kept under control by the dreaded financial police. Nobody was allowed to get ahead in any way and, if there were appearances that a family had acquired something extra, the neighborhood spies

would report them to the economic police. In return for their service, these neighborhood spies got the right to shop at the communist party stores, with no lines, better food, more variety, and better service. They were given about \$150 per month as well.

Once the police started the investigation, the family had to prove where and how they obtained the money to buy certain things, usually in excess of the identical salaries that people earned, barely enough to scrape by. This was by design, to satisfy the utopian communist ideal that everybody had to be equal except the oligarchy in power. The rulers earned more money, shopped at their own stores, and had their own doctors, hospitals, hotels, overseas vacations, Swiss bank accounts, and summer resorts with five-star hotels and maid service. Everyone else lived in the same drab, concrete-block apartments, the size of a studio apartment in the West. Often two families had to share a two-bedroom apartment with only one kitchen and one bathroom.

The Spartan conditions extended to medical care. By definition, everything was free. Trying to actually get proper health care, even though it was "free," cost more than most families earned. There were bribes to see the doctor, bribes to see the nurse, bribes to see the pharmacist, the lab, and X-ray technicians. There were bribes for the cleaning lady when the patient was in the hospital. A family member had to stay with the patient constantly and take care of everything. Otherwise the patient was not fed, changed, or attended to when in distress. The family had to wash the bandages, which were re-used numerous times. The few rusty glass and metal syringes were boiled daily, and so were the needles reused throughout the day.

The doctor and the nurse sometimes did not show up for days. A patient would be hospitalized for weeks and not see a doctor almost the entire time unless bribes were given: bottles of wine, money, foreign chocolate, foreign cigarettes, stockings, shampoo, foreign soap, U.S. dollars, jewelry, etc. Doctors made the same low salaries as any worker, and they compensated by refusing to treat someone properly unless bribes were given. And the medical field is still corrupt to this day because old communist survival bribes die hard.

The quality of doctors was very questionable at best since medical school graduates had no practical experience with patients, only theoretical knowledge. Medical school took six years to complete, with no residency requirements. Most patients took their lives into their own hands when they agreed to have elective surgery. When an emergency arose, the outcome was mostly dire.

Even simple operations ended in disaster: perforated colons during appendectomies, ruptured blood vessels, nicked nearby organs, severe staphylococcal infections, instruments and bandages left inside the patient, and entire hospitals so riddled with microbes that they could not be decontaminated with the methods used then and with the lack of funding and disinfectants. The sanitary conditions were horrible. Nothing was disposable, and nothing was autoclaved.

There was no ethical or moral accountability for the death of any human being. Life was worth zero, and nobody

punished any doctor for malpractice. As all medical personnel were working for the government, who was the family going to sue for the death of their loved one? How could they possibly sue their own government? Had they tried, they were sure to lose every time.

When I was in high school, the entire school received injections with the same three needles and syringes. Every morning they were boiled in a pan and were used all day until the next morning when they were boiled again. I do mean boiled, not autoclaved. I was lucky because my last name started with "A," so I was the first to get any shot. The rest of my schoolmates had gotten hepatitis from dirty needles. We were extremely lucky that there was no HIV epidemic yet.

The hospital wards were filthy and in bad need of repairs and painting. Each ward had anywhere from 15 to 20 metal beds with mattresses stained with blood and other bodily fluids from previous patients. The floors were not usually mopped, and caked blood and other stains were present. The family had to bring towels, sheets, and blankets for the patient. Food was not provided by the hospital. Family members even had to bring water to the patient every day. No intravenous fluids were given.

Each hospital had one ambulance that was equipped with nothing to save lives and did not have an emergency medical technician on board. A driver would supplement his salary on the way to an emergency by giving rides to hitchhikers. Most ambulances arrived too late to save someone's life. However, a patient who had non-life-threatening emergency was lucky to survive the long, uncomfortable, and arduous trip to the hospital in an empty ambulance on the bumpy roads. Today, thanks to Dr. Raed Arafat's work and the ambulance service he helped design and implement, emergency services have caught up to the 21st century.

Dental care was virtually nonexistent. Nobody was allowed to have teeth-cleaning at the dentist; it was too expensive and too capitalist. I am not even sure dentists knew how to do that or had the proper equipment to clean teeth. The only time we were allowed to make an appointment, if we were lucky, was when someone needed teeth pulled or a root canal.

I still remember the dentist who talked and spat in my mouth when I was 15. He was doing a root canal without any anesthetic, oblivious to my screams of pain and the dripping blood on my clothes. He had nicked the inside of my mouth with the drill. The treatment was stretched over a period of three months. People tried to avoid the dentist at all costs. They did their best to brush their teeth if they could find toothbrushes and toothpaste, both of which were constantly in short supply and rationed. It was simpler and less painful to just have bad teeth pulled. It was not unusual to see both young and old with missing teeth.

Medications were always scarce, and people had to bribe pharmacists even for vitamins although technically they were free. It was a family member's responsibility to find drugs and then bring them to the patient to the hospital to be administered. Pharmacies compounded most drugs if they had the ingredients; there were few drugs that were already pre-made in pill form or powder, which had to be mixed with

water or poured into large paper capsules that were very difficult to swallow.

When medicines were available, people did not need prescriptions; they could get whatever drugs they thought might cure their pain. There was no such thing as a controlled substance. The government did not care whether people lived or died. We were all considered a burden on society, and the fewer they had to care for medically, the better. Our parents were valuable as proletariat labor. Students were only valuable as free labor in the fields doing compulsory "volunteer" work.

The government did care about the number of babies born because people died at such young ages due to poor nutrition, hard life in general, and lack of proper medical care. The death rate was equal to and sometimes higher than the birth rate. Dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's regime decided to reward motherhood with stipends per live-born baby and, at the same time, forbade all abortions. It was a felony for both the patient and the doctor if a pregnancy ended in abortion, whether it was a spontaneous one or a medically induced one. If people could not afford the newborn, the government gladly placed the child in state orphanages, where infants received hardly any care. Many infants who were not cradled or loved by nurses became detached and autistic, rocking themselves endlessly. Women who were raped or economically desperate resorted to back alley

abortions and lost their lives. If they survived somehow, the law forbade medical personnel to administer any treatment, and the women were given jail sentences.

My own grandfather and grandmother were victims of communist medical care. Grandfather had surgery to repair a hernia. The surgical site became infected, and he died in horrendous pain. My grandmother had an ulcer, and the village midwife gave her aspirin for pain. She bled to death. Neither the surgeon nor the midwife was held accountable for malpractice. After all, they worked for the government and could not be sued. My best friend had a tonsillectomy, and the doctor damaged her vocal cords.

Medical care has improved some since the "fall" of communism in 1989. Private hospitals have appeared, but the bulk of citizens are still treated by a socialized medicine system that is not much better than the system under communism and still depends on bribes for better care.

When the socialized medicine system runs out of money, sometimes in early May, those who cannot afford private care must suffer the rationing imposed. Socialized medicine may work well for those who don't need it, or just have the sniffles, but not for those suffering a serious illness that requires complicated and expensive testing and/or hospitalization.

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