

Tens of thousands in Russia face medicine shortages as a result of Western sanctions

By David Levine
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The past years have seen an increasingly severe shortage of medicine in Russia, especially for the treatment of cancer and other life-threatening conditions. Russians requiring treatment have been compelled to travel hundreds or thousands of miles to Moscow to obtain treatment because the medicines they need are unavailable in their regions.

The main reason for these shortages has been the combined effect of economic sanctions imposed by Western imperialist governments since 2014 as well as the Russian government's reactive policies of import substitution. The financial sanctions imposed by the United States, affecting financial operations between the two countries, have had practical effects on the availability of medicines in Russia.

Contrary to official propaganda in the Western mainstream press, which highlights sanctions targeting individuals around Putin, these sanctions are harming Russian workers and their children first and foremost. The growing shortages in medicine are a particularly stark demonstration of this fact. Since wealthy Russians have opportunities to travel outside of Russia for medical treatment, the primary victims of the sanctions consist of the poor, the disabled, and the working class as a whole.

The last few months have seen a series of scandals over the arrest of mothers in Russia for trying to get hold of unregistered medicine for their sick children.

Between April and August 2019, two women from Moscow and one from Yekaterinburg were temporarily arrested and charged for illegally obtaining unregistered medicine. In April, Darya Belyayeva of Yekaterinburg came under criminal prosecution for buying online an antidepressant called Elontril for her child. In July, Yelena Bogolyubova of Moscow was also arrested for purchasing online medications that

were to be delivered to her by mail. After the incident received substantial public attention, she was released without charges. A Moscow woman who chose to remain unnamed likewise came under criminal charges in August for obtaining a medicine called Frisium, also for her epileptic child. The charges were once again dropped after several days. At least 3,000 children in Russia are estimated to be currently in need of Frisium treatment.

Last year, in June 2018, Yekaterina Konnova of Moscow had come under criminal prosecution for buying online diazepam rectal solution for her child, who suffers from both cerebral palsy and epilepsy, and then reselling some of the leftover surplus to the parents of other children with epilepsy. The charges were eventually dropped. At least 3,000 children in Russia are estimated to be currently in need of Frisium treatment.

The public outcry over these arrests and charges compelled the minister of health, Veronika Skvortsova, to announce the free distribution of Frisium—still lacking official government registration—to 540 children whose parents had made applications to the government. The Russian government is also reviewing a bill which would grant free medication for critical conditions, including heart failure, and the ministry of health has also announced plans to distribute unregistered forms of diazepam, midazolam, and phenobarbital this month.

However, regardless of these limited measures, tens, if not hundreds of thousands of adults who suffer from these same conditions, as well as countless children and adults who need medicines which have yet to come under any such exceptional policies, will remain without legal means of obtaining the needed treatments in Russia.

The Russian first deputy minister of industry and trade, Sergey Tsyb, told *Deutsche Welle* in November 2018, “They [the West] try to reassure us by saying that there has been no historical precedent for an embargo of medicine, but I have clarified that there has been an embargo [against Russia] in a number of countries, at least in an indirect way. That is, yes, they don’t directly prohibit companies from selling medicines [to Russia], but the economic chain has been paralyzed, as a result of which producers have been afraid or deprived of the possibility of selling pharmaceuticals to countries affected by sanctions.”

The effect of the sanctions has been compounded by the desperate efforts of the Kremlin to accommodate the sanctions regime by a nationalist program of import substitution. Products previously imported from abroad are to be replaced by products produced in Russia and its allies in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

One of the Russian bans on foreign imports has resulted in preventing government agencies from purchasing medicines from producers outside the EAEU in all cases where there are at least two bids from EAEU-based companies. In 2017, this led to the withdrawal from the Russian market of Medac, the primary world producer of asparaginase, which is used to treat acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL), acute myeloid leukemia, (AML) and non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

In an interview with *Novaya Gazeta* dated October 30, 2019, Aleksey Maschan, Director of the Institute of Hematology, Immunology, and Cell Technologies at the Dmitry Rogachev National Medical Research Center, warned that thousands of children and adults will die of curable cancers if the government’s import substitution policies affecting chemotherapy drugs are not changed soon.

Maschan told the newspaper that, cytarabine, also used for the treatment of ALL, AML, chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML), and non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma is currently available in Russia only because foreign exporters have volunteered to sell it to Russia at a loss.

According to the liberal *Novaya Gazeta*, Oncaspar, which serves as an alternative to asparaginase for the treatment of ALL and certain lymphomas, has recently

disappeared entirely from the Russian market. There are approximately 2000 cases of ALL in Russia each year, most of which are children. The charity *Podari zhizn’* has been importing Oncaspar for use in large federal clinics, but the drug has become unavailable in many Russian regions.

Charities such as *Podari zhizn’* continue to import medicines to Russia at the expense of private donors. However, such stopgap and patchwork measures are entirely inadequate to serve the needs of the entire population, which exceeds 140 million.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has a Model List of Essential Medicines, which includes a “core list,” consisting of “minimum medicine needs for a basic health-care system, listing the most efficacious, safe and cost-effective medicines for priority conditions.” Some of the medications on the core list are not regularly available in Russia because they have not been registered. This includes diazepam rectal solution, commonly used to treat epilepsy in children. Because it has not been registered with the Russian government, it therefore cannot be legally bought or sold in Russia, regardless of doctors’ prescriptions.

According to the *Dom s mayakom* (“Lighthouse”) youth hospice and the Vera (“Faith”) hospice support fund, at least 23,000 Russian children are in need of diazepam and similar medications. In an open letter they addressed to Russian President Vladimir Putin in August 2018, they noted, “The absence of medicines or their pediatric forms for the treatment of pain and convulsions causes children to suffer, superfluous calls to emergency medical teams, superfluous intensive care unit hospitalizations, and child deaths resulting from untimely medical treatment (in the case of a seizure lasting over five minutes, the medicine must be administered urgently).”

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