

When a Baby Arrives in the Home

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FOUR MILLION babies are born each year in the Soviet Union, about 17 for every thousand population. Almost all are brought into the world by a doctor or a midwife in a maternity home and almost all their mothers have attended antenatal clinics during the whole of their pregnancy.

After the mother returns home with her baby, she will be visited, the same day or at latest the following day, by the district nurse of the maternal and child health (MCH) service. These home visits to continue the mother's education in baby care are a good illustration of the theme of this year's World Health Day: "Health begins at home". The MCH nurse continues her visits at least once a week during the first month of the baby's life.

The Well Baby

The district paediatrician (child specialist) also visits the baby at home within three days after the mother has left the maternity home. He examines the child and advises the mother on the hygiene, care and feeding of her baby. He also fixes the time of her first consultation at the children's polyclinic. Thereafter, even if the baby is in perfect health, it must be brought to the polyclinic at least once a month. If the mother fails in this, the district nurse goes to her house and urges regular attendance. At each examination, the doctor checks the child's growth and psychomotor development by weighing it, measuring its height, noting its progress in teething and observing its behaviour. He recommends a regimen suited to the child's age and rate of growth, performs various vaccinations according to a set timetable, and prescribes other preventive measures such as vitamin therapy, ultraviolet irradiation and, sometimes, dental

fluoridation. Great attention is given very early to physical education.

In this way a check is kept on the child's health and the essential purpose of the visits is to continue the mother's instruction and ensure that the baby is receiving proper care.

The Sick Baby

During this whole period the doctor is responsible for the baby's health and watches for the first signs of any illness. When necessary he arranges for treatment either at home or at the hospital. Thanks to this constant vigilance and all the preventive measures taken, children are seldom ill and the hospital paediatric services are not overwhelmed with work.

When an infant falls ill he is taken to the health centre or, if necessary, the district paediatrician visits him at home. The visits are repeated as required. The paediatrician is assisted by the district nurse who works and does her home visiting under his supervision. He may at all time ask the help of the doctor in-charge of the health centre or that of the various specialists working there. Mild and non-infectious diseases are treated either at the health centre or at home, but in case of serious illness the child is admitted to hospital where his mother may be allowed to stay with him.

The first year of baby's life is the most critical and places the greatest responsibility on the mother. During that period the foundations are laid for the child's future health and mental and physical development. On the food, care and education that he is given during the first year will depend his harmonious growth.

Correct infant feeding is rightly considered essential for healthy growth. Breast-feeding is the rule and 95 per cent of babies in the Soviet Union are breast-fed. Indeed

statistics show that deaths among breast-fed babies are between one sixth and one quarter of those among bottle-fed babies.

Breast feeding is given according to a strict timetable to ensure the best results. If the mother's milk is insufficient between the age of two and three months, the doctor prescribes supplementary bottle feeding with milk supplied by the milk dispensaries. From the age of four or five months the infant is given additional foods—mashed vegetables, gruels made from various cereals, cream cheese, bread, meat, eggs etc. These foods contain the mineral salts and vitamins needed to prevent anaemia and metabolic disturbances.

By the end of the first year, the child is getting a varied and balanced diet and can be weaned without difficulty.

The Soviet authorities are so convinced that health begins at home at birth that legal provision is made for expectant mothers to get 112 days leave with full pay, 40 days before the birth and 72 days after. In some circumstances, a nursing mother can extend her leave until her baby's first birthday. In any case she works shorter hours.

To be healthy, a child must have proper food and must also be protected against illness. The first danger to be avoided is that of rickets. Preventive measures against this are taken as soon as the baby is one month old. The doctor prescribes vitamin D or ultra-violet radiation treatment, and explains to the parents how to take advantage of fresh air and sunlight to make the child more sturdy and resistant to colds.

Children are vaccinated against a number of diseases—tuberculosis, poliomyelitis, smallpox, measles, whooping cough, diphtheria and tetanus. The vaccinations are done at the children's polyclinics, at creches and kindergartens for pre-school children, and in schools. As a result the incidence of children's illnesses has been considerably reduced and some infectious diseases have practically disappeared.

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