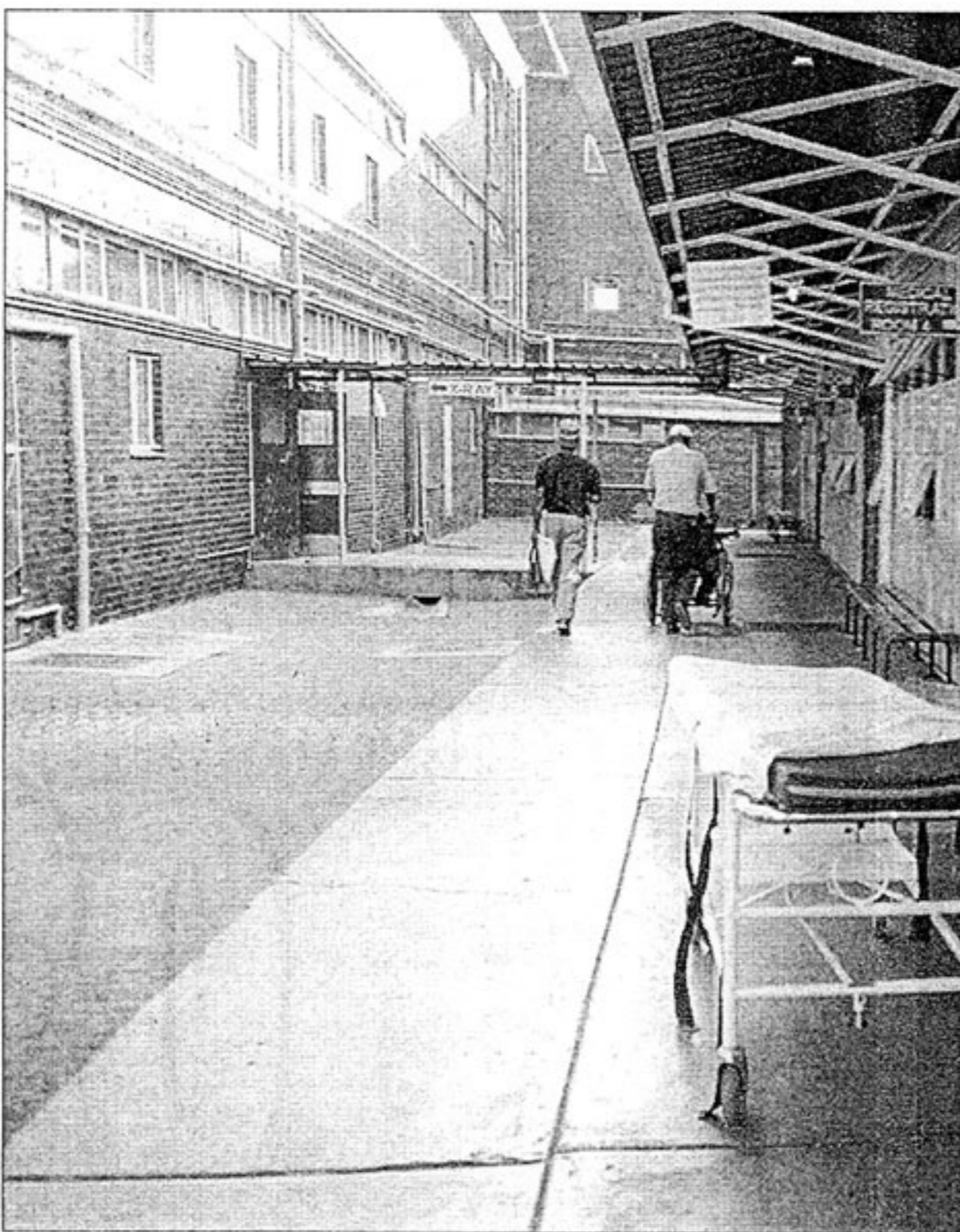


Nightmare in a Russian state hospital



An insurmountable language barrier between patient and medic can be painful, writes **Jonathan D Jansen**



□ What the writer saw in a state hospital in Moscow would make an SA hospital proud, he writes.

I knew I was in serious trouble when at 2am I answered a knock at my hotel door in Moscow to admit two large Russians, a man and a woman claiming to be medics but wearing dirty overalls and carrying a huge tool box.

They arrive two hours after I called and I am bent over in pain in the middle abdomen.

I soon realise that getting ill in a country where there is a serious language barrier between patient and medics can be lethal. We struggle to communicate, using hand signals that in some cultures would be considered offensive.

Only the man speaks, murmuring his observations to the woman, perched on a chair. I think he eventually figures out which part of the anatomy is driving me crazy with pain. He insists, though, on examining my heart. Some distance from the stomach, I think.

It's at this point that I realise it was a mistake to declare my illness to the Russian medical service. The two medics take out of their tool box four huge clamps, two for the arms and two for the legs. I remember thinking that this is the kind of thing I use to jump-start my car, only theirs is much bigger!

It gets worse. The man rushes to the bathroom, pours water into my only drinking glass, and then dips the tips of the clamps into the water before fixing them onto my lower legs and arms.

It is a sight to behold. To my surprise, the motor car jumpers actually yield on a screen a long, straightish printed line that indicates the heart is fine.

The pain is becoming unbearable, and I plead for "pills" while their casual examination of the body continues.

Then, with striking clarity, the man speaks the first coherent line of English: "Your pain is the diagnosis," seemingly to explain why I cannot receive "pills".

For a moment, the poetry of that expression blocks out the lack of logic in what he says. The next moment, I am on my way to the hospital.

I am pushed into the back of an ambulance filled with industrial equipment, and we're off, moving slowly through the streets of Moscow at 3am. Along the way, they stop to chat to a friend, and eventually, after more than 30 minutes, we enter a basic, but decent section of a hospital where the doctor on standby is roused.

After 20 minutes more, I am told, I think, that since I am not a diplomat, I am in the wrong section of the hospital.

My heart sinks. By this time I am desperate for water and pain relief.

The man then tells me something that raises the levels of my anxiety: "Please not be disappointed where we go."

He should not have said that. I implore him to return to the basic but decent side of the hospital and show my fancy medical card prepared by the travel agent, and bearing the all-hours, toll-free number for emergencies of this kind.

I am prepared to pay. He retorts: "In

Russia, money mean nothing." I am missing home, desperately.

We drive to the other side of the hospital, and enter what can only be described as a dump. As I shuffle through the door, about 10 people, patients and medics, drunks and security guards, look at me as if I have fallen out of a tree.

The metaphor might not be inappropriate. Imagine a black man from Africa walking through the door of a state hospital in the middle of Moscow under the gaze of white people who might never have come this close to darkness.

Where I grew up in the Cape, Queen Victoria Hospital was what I thought was the worst kind of medical service you could get in the world, especially on a Friday night when drunks and gangsters wasted away in the passages.

But what I see here in this section of Moscow's state hospital would make the Queen Vic proud.

Huge men are being stitched up in the corridors while smoking nonchalantly; battered women lie on hard benches, bleeding from the most terrible

facial injuries, no doubt as a result of some vodka-inspired brawl involving several young men.

I start to hum *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* from sheer nostalgia.



Without warning, she rushes to me and pierces my finger with what feels like a nail



Then my real troubles begin. The ambulance driver at least had a few English words; the people here have none. I ask for water, making pointed gestures at a dripping tap.

A litre bottle arrives – it is all they have. I am given another litre bottle and, by undoing his zipper, the doctor means to communicate he wants a urine sample.

In a filthy toilet, I let loose. A different medic sends me up the stairs and the imagery is comical with me holding on to my bag, my thick coat and a litre bottle in each hand, one with water and one with urine.

By this time, I am dizzy with pain.

But where do I go? There are scores of little doors, all tightly locked, all labelled in Russian; where do I go for what presumably is the urine test?

At this point, and in some anger, I decide to go back to the hotel and prepare to meet my Maker. But as I slide down the stairs, avoiding the dusty domestic furniture and woodcuttings all over the place, another medic notes my dilemma and decides to show me the way.

Back up the stairs, he chooses a door, knocks, and a truly huge and expressionless Russian woman emerges.

Without warning, she rushes to me and pierces my finger with what feels like a nail.

I recoil in horror, but she has a blood sample and the bottle of urine.

I figure I need to go down the stairs again. A different medic starts to talk to me in persistent Russian and now I feel desperate.

More tests, an injection to the backside, and they tell me, I think, that I am fine: "Nothing wrong."

I am ready to bolt with the pain still inside me. "Please get me a taxi," I plead.

After 20 minutes, with dawn starting to break, I am led off by one of the medics, who suddenly discovers English as we walk through the cold morning to find a taxi: "Give me 5 000 roubles," he says.

I tell him, in Afrikaans, that I once met traffic cops like him in the Free State when they pulled me off for speeding.

A car stops with no clear taxi markings and I jump in, giving the name and address of my hotel. Two hours later we eventually find the hotel.

I wash and set off to address some of the leading scientists in the world on avian flu and its implications for developing countries at a pre-G8 seminar in the beautifully sculptured buildings of the Russian Academy of Science.

I fly home, and as the plane turns on final approach to Johannesburg, I see the heavily polluted air and then an SMS from an American student friend who was mugged in Johannesburg, and I remember that our politicians believe that a shower can sort out HIV infections.

But I'd rather be here than anywhere else.

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