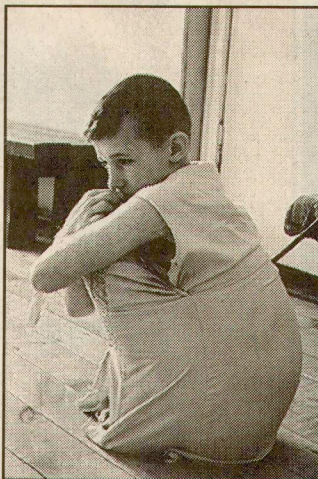


'Imperfect' children left to die

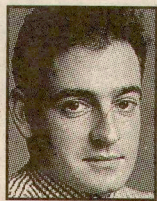


Pictures: Kate Brooks

Without hope: 600,000 children are in care – 'lying rooms' and restraints are common

'I could hardly bring myself to lift the covers in the lying rooms for fear of what I'd find'

IN THE "lying room" of Orphanage No 12 near Moscow, two bleak rows of metal cots are filled with children who cannot walk. With no prospect of recovery, they are left to waste away. For many of the 40 boys and girls, the lying room is the final stop before burial in an unmarked grave.



by Mark Franchetti
Moscow

They have no mothers or fathers to kiss them good night: their parents abandoned them rather than face the stigma of bringing up an "imperfect" child in a society that abhorred disability in Soviet times and is little different today.

Nor are the children's teeth brushed in the morning: even their bodies are washed only once a week, and the stench is as stifling as the system that condemns them to subhuman conditions. Some never leave their beds. Most are severely malnourished. All suffer from excruciating sores.

Dima, a 10-year-old boy who looks half his age, is so frail that he cannot muster the strength to cry. His frightened eyes, set in a gaunt, emaciated face, are turned to the ceiling. His right arm, a stick of bone covered with dry skin, dangles to the floor.

In the next bed Tanya, 6, is bound in a filthy cloth sack to restrain her and tied to a bed rail. Her face is covered with scabs and she howls, rocking back and forth incessantly. I offer futile words of comfort, placing a hand gently on her head, which is shaved as a precaution against lice. She grimaces, baring her few, rotten

teeth, and lets out a piercing shriek.

Further along, desperate cries emanate from beneath the tattered blanket of a small boy with no name. The blanket is pulled back to reveal a skeletal figure in a large cloth nappy, soaked with urine.

Next to a box of brightly coloured balls that no child here is strong enough to use, a girl of 15 who weighs perhaps 50lb is propped on her side with her face to a metal bowl of watery porridge. She spills it onto her sheets as she struggles to feed herself. Most of the other children are force-fed while lying on their backs.

Adjacent to the lying room stands a bare chamber with boarded-up windows. According to orphanage staff, this is where children are put if they are restless. They are routinely given sedatives without medical supervision.

Some are tied to a bench, lying semi-naked in the foetal position, motionless. Others are left in pools of excrement, banging their heads against the floor. As we enter, a small group scrambles towards us,

thin hands stretched out. One girl wraps her arms tightly around my legs. "Papa," she wails relentlessly.

These are some of the 600,000 children who have been abandoned, isolated and condemned in Russia. The 140 confined to Orphanage No 12, north of Moscow, are aged between four and 18 and suffer varying degrees of disability. Those with Down's syndrome and cerebral palsy are placed here with children who have relatively minor problems such as a club foot or cleft palate that would be routinely corrected by surgery in the West. Some have been sent away because of a simple speech impediment.

From the outside, the peeling yellow single-storey building and snow-covered playground give every impression of normality. A suspicious nurse who opened the door took my gifts of fresh fruit and other food but said that she had strict instructions not to let outsiders see the children. Overworked and paid only £9.50 a month, however, she soon relented. It was clear that the staff had long since lost the will to conceal the horrors within.

As I entered the lying room, I found myself retching and pulled my sweater up over my nose. The smell — a mixture of urine, excrement and disease — seizes the throat and grips it for hours. I had imagined talking to the children, stroking them and making them smile. But I could hardly bring myself to lift the covers on the small beds for

At death's door: Irina Dvornikova, one of the children in Orphanage No 12. Staff said she was malnourished because she had Down's syndrome

fear of what I would find underneath.

Kate Hunt, the author of a report on Russian children's homes for Human Rights Watch, the pressure group, said images from some of the institutions she had visited flashed into her mind long afterwards. "It's a shocking indictment of the state's unwillingness to look after its children," she said. "I have been to orphanages in Romania and to refugee camps around the world, but this was worse. There is no excuse for the level of depravity. It's outrageous."

In 1997, the last year for which Human Rights Watch could find figures, 24 children at Orphanage No 12 died. Sources there said the mortality rate had risen every year since 1992.

The root of such tragedy seems to lie in the Soviet Union's prejudice against handicaps. Eight years after it was dissolved, the parents of disabled children still come under pressure from doctors to institutionalise them at birth.

They are told that otherwise they will be treated as social pariahs.

Those who hand over their children often inadvertently sign a death warrant. Once they are locked up, disabled children are three times as likely to die prematurely as they would be if they were living at home.

In 1992 Russia signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, supposedly conferring on its children the protection of international law. Earlier this year President Boris Yeltsin's government reported that despite financial difficulties, Russia adhered to most of the convention's requirements.

Yeltsin himself promised to take up the plight of Russia's abandoned children. "I am very worried about those children in whose eyes we see alarm, fear and sometimes even despair," he said in a grave radio address.

"An end should be put to this. I want to state a warning: everything that concerns children is a presidential priority... "Russian people were always responsive to the pain and suffering of children, the whole community would come to their assistance. Why have we become so indifferent?"

That was in October 1997 and little has changed since.

According to Human Rights Watch, Russia's state-run orphanages violate 20 of the convention's first 41 articles. Two weeks ago a UN commission examining Russia's report held its first preliminary meeting. It is expected to issue its response later this year.

"Abandoned children in Russia are condemned to a life without a future, especially if they suffer from a disability, no matter how minor," said Sergei Koloskov of Russia's Down's Syndrome Association.

The father of a girl with Down's syndrome, Koloskov

100. We took them out of 'lying rooms' where they were wasting away. Within six months we saw a miraculous recovery. Kids who lay motionless now play, smile and eat. Many have learnt to talk properly."

Koloskov is being helped by the London-based Down's Syndrome Association UK, which has launched a Russia appeal for his work. "The real tragedy," he said, "is that all they need is love and proper care."

Adoption is becoming easier in Russia: the government has set up a database with the names of thousands of aban-

andoned children. Under Russian law, foreigners are allowed to adopt children only if no Russian wants them. In 1996, 3,300 Russian children were adopted by foreigners, mostly Americans.

Not all abandoned children in Russia are held in conditions as severe as those of Orphanage No 12. Some for children without "disabilities" have received large donations from the West. Human Rights Watch, however, found countless examples of "cruel, inhuman degradation". In some cases children were beaten and locked for days in a freezing room without food to punish them for trying to run away.

The organisation has also catalogued incidents in which orphanage staff pushed the head of one child into a lavatory and squeezed the testicles of others while interrogating them about misdeeds. Orphanage directors often order punishments to be carried out by older children.

On my return to Moscow from Orphanage No 12, I sat numbly for a while, sipping coffee in a hamburger restaurant, surrounded by dozens of Russian children in brightly coloured snowsuits. This was how Katya, a six-year old girl confined to her bed a few miles away, could have looked.

Katya is bright, articulate and has two healthy parents. She is paralysed in both legs, however, and so she has been abandoned to the state. She recently joined the other children in the lying room and is unlikely ever to leave it.

Abandoned children in Russia are condemned to a life without a future, especially if they have a disability

For more information, contact the Down's Syndrome Association UK on 0181 682 4001 or Sergei Koloskov at the Down's Syndrome Association (Moscow) on 00 7095 925 6476; e-mail: ads@rmt.ru

"We have saved more than

make