Mickey Finn Is Popular Among Russian Criminals

MOSCOW — A visiting American met some friendly Russians outside the Bolshoi Theater, stopped by their home for a drink and woke up the next morning in a field outside Moscow minus his Rolex watch, money and credit cards.

The "Mickey Finn" they had slipped him left him with hallucinations for three days, but he was relatively lucky. One young foreign woman was recently given a drugged drink near a train station and gang-raped while unconscious, according to her doctor.

Yet in today's anarchic Moscow, where all kinds of crime flourish, the marked increase in criminal drugging has raised few alarm bells.

"There are so many crimes in general that nobody cares how many cases (like this) there are," said Yuri V. Tatarinov, spokesman for the Moscow Crime Directorate. "We have a lot of other problems."

According to the Russian and Western doctors who treat the poisoned victims, the use of Mickey Finns has increased noticeably in the last two years to become a routine hazard of life in Moscow.

"Someone will die from this soon, as it is dangerous stuff," warned Joshua Bamberger, the doctor who heads U.S. Global Health, an American-run clinic in Moscow.

Criminals appear to have no trouble getting clonidine, the preferred Mickey Finn drug.

"It's been forbidden for the last three or four years, but the number of poisonings has not fallen," said Dr. Yuri N. Ostapenko, head of the Health Ministry's Toxicology Information and Advisory Center. "Last year, we would sometimes see five or six people a day."

Clonidine is a blood-pressure medication that is odorless, tasteless, fast-acting and cheap.

In the United States, clonidine is a seldom-used drug sold only by prescription, but in Russia the tablets are sold over the counter under a Bulgarian brand name. A package containing enough tablets to knock out 10 men cost 5,250 rubles — less than $1.20.

But the pills are slow-acting and clumsy to use, so most poisoners prefer a concentrated liquid form of the drug, said Dr. Yuri N. Ostapenko, head of the Health Ministry's Toxicology Information and Advisory Center.

Many of the poisoners are prostitutes, or women pretending to be prostitutes to lure clients to a convenient place to rob them.

The scams are infinite — and inventive, Dr. Ostapenko said. Many victims are lured from train stations or airports by people who offer them a place to spend the night. One clever poisoner posed as an Oriental healer who promised to cure obesity, Ostapenko said. He made house calls and even inserted a few acupuncture needles in his "patients" before dosing them and their dogs and burglarizing the apartment.

In the past, most victims were slipped the drug in an alcoholic drink, Dr. Ostapenko said, but now teetotalers are being poisoned with spiked coffee, tea or soda, sometimes in restaurants and cafes.
Laetrile's Worth as a Cure Debated

BY LESLIE REED
WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

Lincoln — During a public hearing before Nebraska lawmakers Friday, six witnesses told true-life stories of miraculous cancer cures attributed to laetrile.

Their testimony before the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee was countered by leading Nebraska physicians who said the unorthodox therapy offers only false hope.

Sen. Cap Dierks of Ewing introduced Legislative Bill 952 to allow doctors in Nebraska to legally prescribe laetrile — also known as vitamin B-17 — to terminally ill patients.

His actions were prompted in part by state medical authorities' efforts to discipline the late Dr. Otis Miller of Ord for prescribing laetrile to a 5-year-old O'Neill, Neb., boy suffering from a cancerous tumor. A family physician in Ord for 45 years, Miller died of a heart attack Jan. 20, the same day Health and Human Services Department officials decided that he would be fined and reprimanded for his actions.

Laetrile therapy received national attention in the 1970s and early 1980s when actor Steve McQueen went to Mexico for laetrile treatment of his pancreatic cancer. He died despite the treatment.

Doctors from the University of Nebraska Medical Center and the Nebraska Medical Association testified Friday that a 1980 trial by the National Cancer Institute demonstrated that laetrile therapy had small or negligible benefit. It also can be toxic because intestinal bacteria convert it to the poison cyanide, they said.

Dr. Ron Klutman of Columbus, president-elect of the Nebraska Medical Association, said he objects to physicians prescribing a drug that gives only false hope.

"It prevents patients and their families from working through their emotions after being diagnosed with a fatal disease," he said. "I think false hope is about the worst thing you have."

Yet the little boy Miller treated with laetrile, Michael Nekolite, was among those who attended Friday's hearing.

Wearing a bright green T-shirt bearing the words "I'm Michael," the 5-year-old squeezed a little in his chair while his mother, Mimi, told the committee how she decided more than a year ago to seek laetrile treatment for her son, who already had undergone two surgeries and chemotherapy.

Michael was diagnosed with a brain tumor in September 1994, when he was 2 years old. When the tumor returned after surgery and chemotherapy, Michael had a second surgery and was about to undertake a round of difficult and dangerous radiation therapy when his mother decided to call a halt to the conventional treatment.

"I could not bring myself to see my son go through any more torture and side effects," she said. "I wanted him to have a chance to be a normal child."

Since the laetrile treatment, Michael has been cancer-free for a year, Nekolite said. He gets Magnetic Resonance Imaging scans every three months to be sure.

Others who told laetrile success stories included:

Maxine Johnson of Riverdale, Neb., who said she was told in 1976 that she had inoperable cancer and had six months to live. She underwent six months of laetrile therapy and is still living 22 years later. "I'm glad to be here," she said.

Harold Miller of Elgin, who said his cancer remains in remission after five years on laetrile therapy. "I'm active in square dancing and clog dancing," he said. "At 76, I'm not exactly laying down yet."

Dr. Margaret Tempero, director of the Cancer Center at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, said such success stories are very rare.

"We often see things we don't understand — spontaneous remissions," she said. "People get gifts. These are miracles."

She said that in the 1970s, the National Cancer Institute sought information from the 75,000 people then taking laetrile and received only 93 positive reports. Of those, 26 had no cancer at all. Only six showed benefit that could be attributed solely to laetrile. Further tests were conducted that demonstrated no significant benefit.

She said she is most concerned that laetrile is not regulated and can be poorly manufactured. She said she is uncomfortable having physicians prescribe a drug that might be contaminated or is of unknown potency.