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Traditional Healers Facing Scrutiny

By Alexander Bratersky

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Walnut shells glued to ankles have been recommended as a hepatitis cure by folk healers. **Wikimedia Commons**

They treat hemorrhoids by inserting fresh cucumbers in rectums, they promise to heal hepatitis by gluing walnut shells to ankles, and of all the remedies known to modern medicine, they have singled out urine as a cure-all for many diseases.

Traditional healers thrive in Russia, offering dubious or even harmful treatments to those too poor or uneducated to seek professional help. But as regional officials in Kirov have learned, any effort to interfere in their work will likely result in a visit from prosecutors.

There are as many as 200,000 certified healers in Russia, said Vladimir Yegorov, a former health ministry official who heads the Russian Professional Medical Association of Traditional and Non-Traditional Medicine.

Add in the 100,000 healers seeing patients illegally, according to Yegorov's estimates, and that's roughly half the 614,000 medical doctors licensed to practice in Russia.

"Demand for nontraditional medicine is growing because our conventional medical system is in bad shape and paid medical care is too expensive," Yegorov told The Moscow Times.

Health was one of four priority national projects announced by then-President Vladimir Putin in 2005, but officials have struggled to provide modern medical care in many of the country's impoverished cities and towns.

The Health and Social Development Ministry has published a bill on its web site that would give the federal body control over the licensing of traditional healers, which is now handled by regional governments.

But the state itself has occasionally sent mixed signals on how seriously it takes professional medical advice.

Gennady Malakhov, who until this year hosted a program on state-run Channel One television offering medical remedies, informed his millions of viewers in 2009 that sit-ups are the best cure for diabetes.

"Nonconventional medicine" can be interpreted broadly, allowing crooks to take advantage of protections offered to healers, Yegorov argued. But the state should not crack down on legally protected "folk medicine."

Healers' role in society has been debated most actively in the Kirov region, a relatively impoverished region in Central Russia that sought to regulate the industry more closely last year.

The Kirov regional government started receiving complaints in 2009 from the public against several local healers, Maria Gaidar, a deputy prime minister in Kirov, wrote on her Livejournal blog Nov. 10.

The region's public health department investigated and discovered that in past years, officials from the department had certified healers with absolutely no medical education, and in some cases not even a high school education, the department said in a statement to The Moscow Times.

"Folk remedies are methods of healing, preventing and diagnosing illnesses based on the experience of many generations of people, which has been established in common tradition rather than in formal writing," the statement said, adding that such remedies are protected by federal law.

Individual regions must certify aspiring healers who provide a recommendation from a professional medical association, the statement said. The certificate permits the healer to work throughout the region that issued it.

Gaidar wrote on her blog that healers are allowed to establish their own professional associations, and that health officials were required to certify people who provided the necessary paperwork.

Local officials eventually revoked eight licenses — at the request of prosecutors — after finding that they were provided by associations that had been formed illegally, the

department's statement said.

Hoping to curb what it saw as abuses of the system, the region's health officials stopped issuing the certificates to healers altogether on Jan. 1, 2010.

The healers then turned to local prosecutors, who ruled that the department was violating citizens' rights. Health officials were then ordered to develop more detailed regulations.

"How, then, are department staff — who are specialists in traditional medicine and are licensed doctors — supposed to determine whether healers' methods are safe?" the head of the department, Dmitry Matveyev, wrote in the statement.

"Will the department that issued a certificate to a healer be ultimately held responsible if the healer damages the health of a patient?"

At the same time, he suggested that seven years of medical school and complicated licensing for medical doctors were too burdensome for people looking to practice simple folk remedies.

Dmitry Novosyolov, a spokesman for Kirov regional prosecutors, told The Moscow Times that the they were required to enforce the law.

He said the healer who prodded prosecutors to get involved worked for the so-called KrasEnio International Scientific Practical Center of Information Medicine, which is run by Nikolai Orlov, a retired military doctor.

Prosecutors now have no complaints against the center, which has since registered as a medical institution.

Orlov told The Moscow Times that he did not have any problems until Gaidar, a prominent liberal activist and daughter of late acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, joined the regional government of Governor Nikita Belykh, another well-known liberal politician.

Orlov, who is fighting in the Supreme Arbitration Court to get his certificate re-issued, said his center would continue to provide traditional medical services to patients until then, he said.

"We have all the leading specialists on board," he said, referring to his center's web site, which lists several medical professors as supporters.

Two of the professors listed on Orlov's site contacted by The Moscow Times — Boris Kuznik of the Chita-based State Medical Academy and Anatoly Tayursky from the Siberian branch of Russian Academy of Education — said they had nothing to do with the center.

Orlov was also singled out in 2008 by Semyon Galperin, a doctor and editor of a web site that tracks medical charlatans. Galperin published his e-mail conversation with Orlov, who used offensive language and threats against him.

Orlov denied that he had ever written to Galperin.