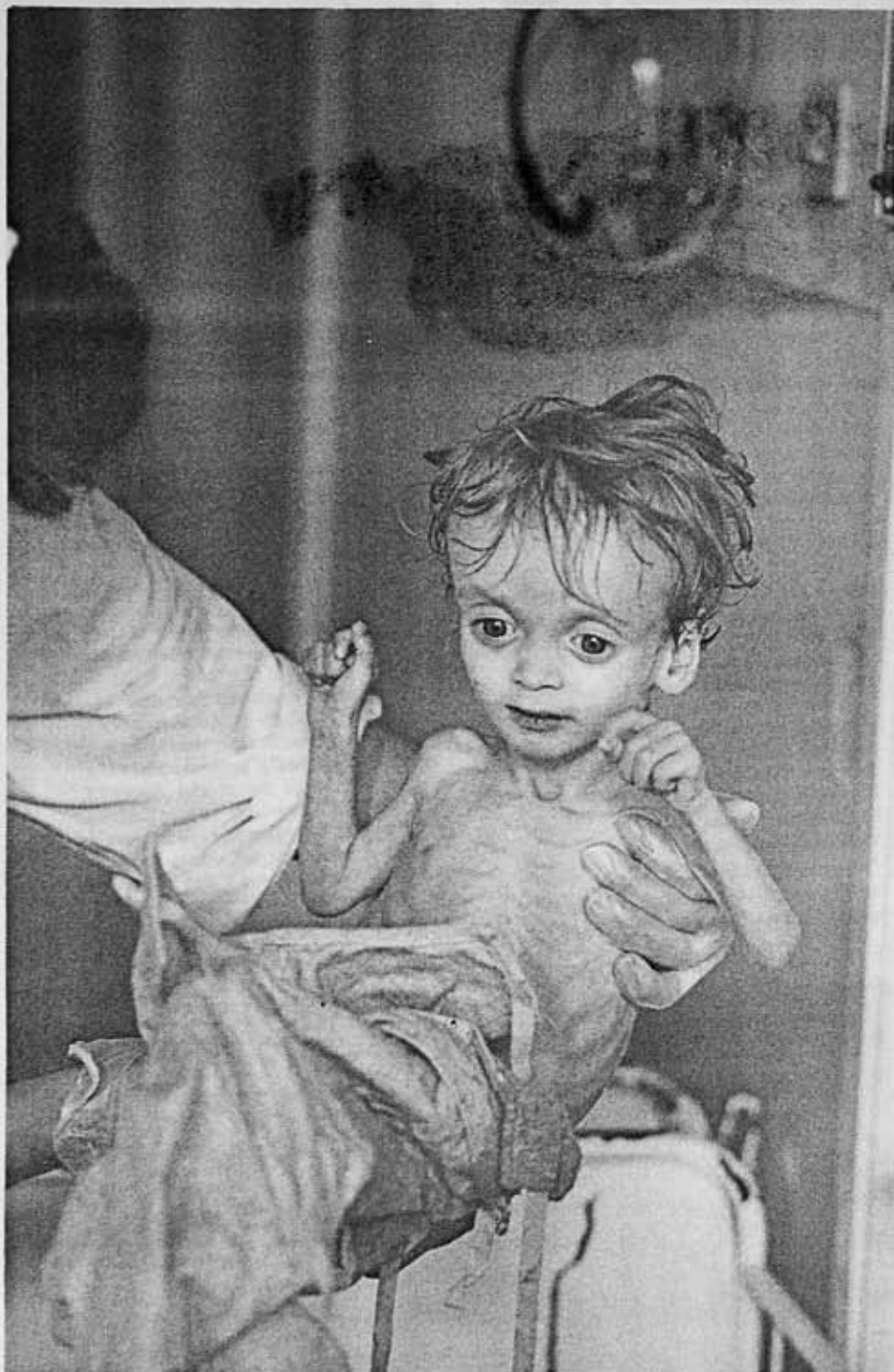


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MICHAEL CARROLL PHOTO

ONE OF 60 AIDS-INFECTED BABIES AT THE VICTOR BABES HOSPITAL IN BUCHAREST, SHORTLY BEFORE HIS DEATH.

CEAUSESCU'S LEGACY

ROMANIA'S AIDS BABIES

While the deadly disease ravaged a nation's children, its very existence was being denied

By William Griffo

BUCHAREST — As an oncologist in New York City, I am inevitably confronted with the limitations and failures of medicine. However, I was neither professionally nor emotionally prepared for Romania's AIDS babies.

Of all the brutal legacies of the Nicolae Ceausescu dictatorship, the pediatric AIDS epidemic may be the most shocking. Spawned by infected blood supplies and spread by the outdated practice of giving blood transfusions to newborns, often with used needles, AIDS among Romania's children was then allowed to spread virtually unchecked as the Ceausescu government denied that it even existed.

Cruelly, the disease has run rampant through the very institutions that should be preventing it: pediatric hospitals, clinics and orphanages. In this most backward of countries, outdated and unclean medical practices have helped turn hospitals and orphanages into virtual shooting galleries, where one unclean needle can contaminate any number of infants.

One baby, a fair-haired male (ironically named Nicolae), stands out in my memory as a sad symbol of the plight of Romania's AIDS babies. Nicolae had reportedly received a microtransfusion soon after birth, contracted the AIDS virus, and was then abandoned by his mother and placed

in a state-run orphanage. But his transfer to a hospital was delayed by a combination of AIDS phobia, professional ignorance and government-stimulated suppression of information.

Only the new-found freedom inspired by the revolution and the execution of the Ceausescus provided the professional staff with the courage to voice the obvious diagnosis and admit Nicolae to the Victor Babes Hospital in Bucharest. Considering how incredibly frail he was when I saw him, with his dark brown eyes standing out like neon lights in a bony skeleton and his arms reaching out as if for something or someone warm, it was hard to believe that he had actually improved and gained a few kilograms since his transfer from the orphanage.

Statistics are staggering

There are at least 60 babies now with AIDS at this hospital. They are all extremely ill, malnourished and cared for by a fearful, overworked and unappreciated yet dedicated staff. Many have been abandoned by their parents, often as a result of the fears and prejudice of their families about AIDS. A gruesome reminder of this is the fact that nearly 70 babies, having died from AIDS, remain in a Bucharest mortuary, unclaimed by their terrified families. At last word, Nicolae was among them.

As of last month, a total of 722 cases of pediatric HIV infection had been identified in Romania out of a relatively small sample tested. It is found in males and females, usually between ages 6 months and 3 years, and is largely concentrated in four districts.

In Constanta alone, a district in southeast Romania bordering the Black Sea and the Soviet Union, the virus was discovered in 308 of 710 babies tested, a horrifying proportion. The close proximity of naval bases and the requirement that military personnel and job applicants (many of whom are transients) donate blood, helps to explain the high prevalence of infection there.

No accurate estimate of the true prevalence of the AIDS virus in Romania is available. No comprehensive data are available because the Ceausescu regime denied that the AIDS virus even existed.

In nearly all of the AIDS cases, the transmission of the virus into children was not associated with concomitant maternal in-

Continued

Romania

fection. Rather, inappropriate medical practices appear to be responsible. In Romania, and to a lesser extent in other Eastern bloc countries and the Soviet Union, microtransfusions of unscrubbed whole blood were routinely administered to underweight or developmentally impaired newborns and infants.

Sources of infection

The blood was obtained from either paid donors or military personnel of the local district. The transfusions were administered via the umbilical cord in newborns or intravenously in infants. In essence, the most medically vulnerable infants received relatively large inoculations of blood that were HIV-contaminated. And because of the relatively small amount of blood transfused, one pint of contaminated blood could infect many infants.

In addition, because of the scarcity of needles and syringes throughout the country, needles were and still are frequently reused. It is therefore probable that recycled vaccination needles also contributed to the spread of the HIV virus in orphanages and pediatric hospital wards.

Since only adults donate blood, the source of HIV in microtransfusions is obviously infected Romanian adults. Although the practice of microtransfusions has now been repudiated, unless drastic and immediate changes in the handling of blood products and secretions occur - along with the screening of all blood products for HIV throughout the entire country, not merely in Bucharest as is happening now - the virus will spread rapidly.

The newly-won freedom of Romanians to travel, as well as the interest of Western and Pacific businessmen in Romanian economic markets, could likewise facilitate the spread of HIV across the continents. For instance, several prostitutes in Bucharest were interviewed. Knowledge of prophylactic measures against HIV infection was nearly nonexistent among them, as was the availability of condoms. Thus, as has been demonstrated throughout the history of this global epidemic, ignorance, fear, unprotected sex, sharing of needles, and unscrubbed blood products provide fertile ground for the spread of the virus.

While part of the story of Romanian HIV is statistical and epidemiological, this is only a small part. The still deeper tragedy lies in the pain, suffering and dismal lives of these lonely, infected babies, the struggles and fears of their nurses and physicians and the legacy of the Ceausescu regime that continues to contribute to this horror. Speaking for our group of AmeriCares volunteers, the inert data and academic discussions at the virology institute could not prepare us emotionally for what we saw

In the pediatric hospitals and orphanages, the conditions were reminiscent of a charity hospital in the United States around 1930. Imagine 10 to 12 individual rusty cribs lined up along a paint-chipped drab-gray wall in a room 10 feet by 10 feet. Upon entering, you are overwhelmed by the putrid aroma of feces, rotten eggs and concentrated ammonia and disinfectant. On entering, you immediately hear the crying and whimpers and see the piercingly sad eyes of infants in various stages of illness, all malnourished and neglected. While you try to brace yourself emotionally, you reach out to hold an infant, who then clings to your outstretched arms.

In the pediatric wards of Bucharest, health-care professionals (all heavily gowned and masked) care for nearly 50 infants each. The tentative and reluctant holding of these babies by the staff confirmed the look of fear and apprehension in their eyes. While fear of contagion understandably affects many health-care professionals in the United States, I suspect that such fears in Romania are deeper, more often fueled by inaccurate information, rumors, prejudice and a 25-year Ceausescu legacy of isolation, lies and ignorance. Under Ceausescu's regime, the acknowledgment of HIV in Romania was prohibited.

One may therefore ask: What can and should be done? How can we help? What can and should American political leaders and professionals do during this era of great crisis? I think that, first of all, we must recognize our obvious limitations, while providing humanitarian support and love. As a physician, I can recognize two great areas of need.

Education - and generosity

First, the Romanian people must be educated about the particular characteristics of this virus, how it is and is not spread, and, most important, how the epidemic among their infants began. With the help of the media, Romanian mothers, long intimidated by an authoritarian health-care system itself corrupted by the Ceausescu's pathology, must now be encouraged to act on behalf of their uninfected newborns to protect them from continued microtransfusions or unsterile injections of medications in hospitals, clinics and orphanages.

The safety of the blood supply throughout Romania must be assured. International leadership from the World Health Organiza-

tion and *Medicins du Monde* (Paris) has begun to coordinate the difficult yet critical task of initiating seroprevalence studies and providing the resources to screen all donated blood. Screening for HIV is always a formidable task, raising questions regarding the legal rights of those screened and protection of confidentiality. This task becomes even more formidable in such a postrevolutionary society as this, one that still lacks the guarantees of basic civil liberties, protection from discrimination or imprisonment of those infected with HIV. These problems, combined with the inability to conduct scientifically vigorous and epidemiologically sound studies, however, at this time, must not be allowed to prevent these initial efforts.

Second, these seemingly insurmountable obstacles now present in Romania must not be allowed to deter those generous individuals or corporate leaders whose humanitarian instincts have and will always reach out to help individuals in need. These babies lack such basic necessities as infant formulas and antibiotics to treat their opportunistic infections as well as toys and blankets. The provision of these items, which would improve, even if only marginally, the quality of their lives should not be obstructed by either our denial of the situation or by the distractions of so many other concurrent calamities.

To fail to help these Romanian infants by educating their parents and encouraging and supporting their health professionals, while offering Romanians our special American technological know-how and optimism, would not only be negligent. In fact, it would accomplish something far worse. It would perpetuate the Ceausescu legacy of fear, ignorance, deprivation and human suffering, sadly allowing their legacy of evil to live on even after their deaths.



TWO AIDS VICTIMS IN A HOSPITAL MORTUARY, INCLUDING THE CHILD PICTURED ON THE FRONT OF THIS SECTION.