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U.S. Doctor and Daughter Sickened by Poison in Russia

By C. J. CHIVERS

Correction Appended

MOSCOW, March 6 — An American doctor and her daughter were being treated in a Moscow hospital on Tuesday after showing signs of thallium poisoning. Thallium is a highly toxic element with a history of use in pesticides and in murder.

Both women, who emigrated from the Soviet Union in the 1980s but recently returned to Russia for a vacation, were severely sickened but their lives are not in danger, medical officials here said.

“They have positive dynamics, and their condition is improving,” said Dr. Viktor M. Kaznacheyev, the chief physician at the Sklifosovsky Clinic here, said in a telephone interview. The women have been treated at the clinic since falling ill on Feb. 24.

Dr. Kaznacheyev said the victims, Dr. Marina Kovalevsky, 49, and her daughter, Yana, 26, of Studio City, Calif., were under the supervision of poison specialists. “They were in a serious condition when they were delivered here,” he added.

Citing privacy concerns, he declined to discuss further details beyond saying that their symptoms were consistent with thallium poisoning.

Dr. Kovalevsky is an internal medicine specialist in private practice in West Hollywood, Calif., and has had admitting privileges at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center since 1999, a spokeswoman for the hospital said. She was educated in the 1970s in Kemerovo, an industrial and coal-mining region in southern Siberia.

She returned to Russia on Feb. 14 for a vacation and was due back at her office to see patients on Feb. 26, Dr. Arkady Stern, a colleague covering for her at her practice on Santa Monica Boulevard, said by telephone.

The circumstances of the poisonings are unclear, but it appears that Dr. Kovalevsky and her daughter ingested the poison while in Moscow. “She left Los Angeles in perfectly good health,” Dr. Stern said.

The mystery of the poisonings, after the fatal poisoning in London last year of Alexander V. Litvinenko, a former K.G.B. officer and outspoken critic of the Kremlin, attracted immediate attention and speculation in the Russian news media.

Mr. Litvinenko’s initial diagnosis was thallium poisoning, but his doctors later determined that he had ingested radioactive polonium. Before dying, he publicly accused President Vladimir V. Putin of having had a hand in the poisoning. The killing remains unsolved.
Thallium, an element with no taste or odor, has been used as an ingredient in insecticides and rat poison, and as well by criminals and intelligence services, including those of the Soviet Union and of Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

Published reports have said that the Central Intelligence Agency chose thallium as a poison to be sprinkled in Fidel Castro’s shoes — a plot that was never carried out.

When ingested, thallium is a slow-acting poison that can cause excruciating abdominal pain, breathing difficulties, damage to the nervous system and extensive hair loss.

Dr. Stern said the two women had been administered Prussian blue, an antidote commonly used to counteract thallium’s effect, and had undergone dialysis to help rid their systems of lingering toxins.

He said that the women had been cleared to travel from Moscow and that they hoped to return to the United States by the end of the week and receive further treatment there.

There is no indication that either woman would have been of interest to Russian intelligence services, and no clear criminal motive for the poisoning.

“My personal opinion,” Dr. Stern said, “is that it could be some mistake. I cannot imagine that anyone in their right mind would want to hurt this person. She is very loved and very respected by her patients, her colleagues and her friends.”

The authorities in Moscow said they were trying to determine whom the women had seen since they arrived. The police are retracing the routes of the women in Moscow to try to detect traces of thallium in any places they visited, according to the Interfax news agency.

Correction: March 8, 2007

Because of an editing error, an article yesterday about an American doctor and her daughter who were severely sickened by poisoning while vacationing in Moscow referred incorrectly to Interfax, the news agency that reported the development. It is privately owned, not an “official” enterprise controlled by the government.