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THE AGEING OF MEDICAL ACADEMIC STAFF IN UZBEKISTAN AT THE TURN OF INDEPENDENCE (1990–1996)

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Abstract
Based on archival documents and statistical sources, the thesis examines the age structure and research productivity of academic staff in the medical field of Uzbekistan in 1990–1996, using the Tashkent Medical Institute, the Research Institute of Phthisiology and Pulmonology and the Republican Oncology Research Centre as case studies. It argues that the late Soviet system failed to renew its academic staff, that this problem passed into the period of independence, and that it shaped the agenda of later reforms.

Keywords: Medical academic staff, ageing, Tashkent Medical Institute, phthisiology, oncology, research productivity, staff renewal, independence.

In the Soviet period, the training of medical scientists was centrally planned. Admission to postgraduate study, the topics of dissertations and the number of research posts were set by Union and republican bodies. Positions in departments and laboratories were filled for long periods and rarely changed hands, so staff renewal depended on administrative decisions rather than on academic results. During the post-war decades the network itself grew quickly: by 1984 Uzbekistan had 19 medical research institutes and 4 central research laboratories [1], and the number of graduates of medical higher education institutions rose from 1,284 in 1960 to 4,237 in 1986 [2]. However, the growth of the network was not matched

by a planned renewal of the generations of scientists who led it. By the end of the 1980s, this produced a sharp ageing of the academic community.

The Tashkent Medical Institute (ToshMI), the oldest and largest medical higher education institution of the republic, shows the scale of the problem. An analysis of its teaching staff in 1990 found that almost 40 percent of department heads were of retirement age, and the institute had not a single professor under 40. Fewer than half of its doctors of science supervised postgraduate students, which meant that the main channel for training the next generation was used only partially. Only 12 of the 82 departments took part in contract research, and 80 percent of the teaching staff had not prepared a single monograph in three years. The consequences were visible in teaching as well: a state inspection found that 75 percent of ToshMI students had average or unsatisfactory knowledge [3]. These indicators show that the ageing of staff was accompanied by a decline in research activity and in the quality of training.

The roots of this situation lay in the previous decades. In the 1979–1980 academic year ToshMI had 8,600 students, 80 departments and about 1,000 teachers, among them 90 professors and doctors of science and 552 candidates of medical sciences; over 1920–1980 the institute trained about 300 doctors and more than 2,000 candidates of science [4]. This large cohort of scientists was formed mainly in the 1950s–1970s and, holding its positions for decades, aged together. By 1990 the generation that had built the institute's scientific schools was approaching retirement at the same time, while the system had not prepared enough younger leaders to take its place.

The problem was not limited to higher education. It was also typical of the wider health system, which at the end of the Soviet period remained understaffed: in 1990 Uzbekistan had 33 doctors per 10,000 population against 43 for the USSR as a whole, and in Karakalpakstan, Bukhara and Khorezm the figure was only

25–29 [3]. Under these conditions, experienced specialists stayed in their posts long after retirement age, since there was often no one ready to replace them.

The same pattern continued in research institutes after independence. At the Research Institute of Phthisiology and Pulmonology in 1994, 87.5 percent of doctors of science and 53.3 percent of candidates of science were over 50. Of these, 75 percent of doctors and 40 percent of candidates of science were of retirement age. At the same time, the institute employed 34 young scientists and doctors under 35, including 5 postgraduate students and clinical residents [5]. Young staff were therefore present, but most of them had not yet earned scientific degrees, and a whole middle generation – researchers aged 35–50 who should have taken over the leadership of departments and laboratories – was thin. This "missing middle" was the most dangerous consequence of the late Soviet staffing policy, because it broke the continuity between the founders of scientific schools and their potential successors.

Research productivity in the first years of independence also reflected the generational problem. At the Republican Oncology Research Centre, 203 publications appeared in 1995–1999, but most of them were conference abstracts, and full articles in scientific journals made up only a small share. On average, one staff member produced only 0.5 articles a year, and over seven years the centre issued just three methodological manuals [6]. Such figures point to a lack of experience in publishing in peer-reviewed and international journals, a skill that the ageing Soviet-trained staff had rarely needed and that the young staff had not yet acquired.

At the same time, independence did not stop the training of new scientists. In 1991–1994, 68 doctors and 270 candidates of science were trained in the medical field [7]. In 1996 the Phthisiology institute alone completed 3 doctoral and 3 candidate dissertations, and its researchers presented their results at international

congresses in Stockholm, Vienna and Almaty [5]. Participation in such forums, which had been almost impossible for most Uzbek researchers in the Soviet period, opened new opportunities for young scientists. These figures show that the scientific tradition survived the economic crisis of the early 1990s, and that the institutes tried to use the new conditions to reconnect with the international scientific community.

The overall scale of the academic community at the start of independence explains why this continuity was possible. In 1991–1992 the medical higher education system employed more than 7,900 teachers, including 450 doctors and 2,300 candidates of science [8]. In 1994–1996 medical higher education institutions trained 77 doctors and 322 candidates of science, and in 1993–1997 682 researchers were admitted to postgraduate (aspirantura) and 130 to doctoral programmes. Applied output also grew: the number of inventions in the field rose from 2 in 1991 to 105 in 1999, medical universities received 76 patents in 1997–1999, and in 1991–2000 150 researchers of the Second Tashkent State Medical Institute alone completed internships in 15 countries [9]. The capacity to train new scientists was therefore preserved; what remained unresolved was the time needed for these new cohorts to mature and replace the retiring generation.

The long-term effect of these efforts can be traced in the later history of the same institutions. Today the Republican Specialized Scientific and Practical Medical Centre of Phthisiology and Pulmonology, the successor of the institute, employs 9 doctors and 13 candidates (PhD) of science [10]. The preservation of its scientific school through the difficult 1990s was thus a precondition for its later transformation into a specialized centre.

In conclusion, the ageing of academic staff in Uzbek medicine was not a product of independence but an inheritance of the late Soviet system, in which the expansion of the institutional network was not accompanied by planned renewal

of its scientific leadership. The first years of independence preserved scientific schools and maintained the training of doctors and candidates of science, but they did not solve the generational gap or the problem of low research productivity. This explains why later reforms, especially after 2017, paid special attention to training young researchers through basic doctoral programmes, to the publication of research in international journals and to the integration of research, clinical practice and training within specialized scientific and practical centres.

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