During August and September of 1958, I spent five weeks in various cities of the Soviet Union as a member of the Comparative Education Society which was conducting a field trip for the purposes of studying the Soviet system of education. This society is essentially nonmedical in nature and since I was the only medical representative, pre-arrangements for visits to medical institutions had not been made for me. Therefore, I had to make “on-the-spot” arrangements after arrival in the Soviet Union. With very little difficulty, the necessary contacts and appointments were made through the agency of the Foreign Department of the Ministry of Health, USSR or Intourist. The latter is the official Russian travel agency which arranges for itinerary, transportation, hotels, interpreters and other needs of the traveler in Russia. Upon one occasion, in Kiev, this organization was unable to make an appointment for me with the Director of the Kiev Medical Institute, presumably because of unavailability of interpreters. This was then accomplished through the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries. At each institution that I visited, I was received graciously and my hosts were hospitable and cooperative without secretiveness. This was true even at Botkin Hospital, in Moscow, where I presented myself without previous appointment or official introduction. Lengthy visits were made at the following institutions: The Moscow Scientific Research Institute of Neurosurgery, the Kiev Scientific Research Institute of Neurosurgery, The Leningrad Scientific Research Institute of Neurosurgery, and the neurosurgical department of Botkin Hospital, a large city hospital. In addition, I visited the Moscow Scientific Institute of Neurology and medical schools in Leningrad and Kiev as well as other medical facilities of the Soviet Union. Although the Society also visited Tashkent, in Uzbekistan in Central Asia, our stay there was too short for me to visit the neurosurgeon who practises there or the medical school in that city.

The introduction of the Russian medical student to the subject of neurosurgery is through the departments of neurology and general surgery during their clinical years of medical school. The curriculum for each of the 6 years of medical school is uniform in all of the more than 70 medical schools in the nation. None has an independent chair of neurosurgery. Although three scientific research institutes of neurosurgery exist in the USSR (Moscow, Kiev, and Leningrad) none participates officially in teaching programs at the...
medical schools. Medical students may occasionally visit them independently, however, without any formal sanction from the medical school. The first opportunity that the young doctor who is inclined toward a neurosurgical career finds to seek his goal is at the completion of a three-year compulsory general practice period which almost every medical school graduate must experience. This is the young doctor’s first independent clinical practice after being graduated from medical school and receiving his doctor’s certificate. At that point there are several avenues to follow which, if open, can lead him or her into neurosurgery. The degree of competence in this specialty varies, however, according to the avenue followed. Thus, there are in Russia doctors practising neurosurgery who are at various levels of neurosurgical ability.

The highest neurosurgical achievement is obtained by doctors seeking a research career in neurosurgery. This requires that they first earn a scientific degree. These degrees are of two types and they may be obtained at one of the three scientific research institutes of neurosurgery. The system of earning these degrees is not restricted to neurosurgery, nor to medicine for that matter, but is the same in all professional pursuits in the Soviet Union. Following basic professional training, whether it be pedagogy, chemistry, or engineering, one may aspire toward a research career in that field and work toward the same two types of scientific research degrees. The first is a candidate’s degree and the final highest degree is a doctor’s degree. This latter is to be distinguished from the doctor’s certificate the medical student receives upon graduation. The candidate’s degree qualifies the bearer to accept a position as docent (lecturer) in a teaching institution of his profession if one is available. Since there are no chairs of neurosurgery in the medical institutes (medical schools in Russia) a neurosurgeon with this degree could, if he wished, accept a docent’s position in a chair of neurology at a medical institute, if available. Inasmuch as large hospitals are also associated with medical institutes, the opportunity for neurosurgical practice there would be available to him. On the other hand, he may, if requested, remain as one of the permanent staff at one of the three neurosurgical institutes where he won his degree and continue work, if so inclined, toward his doctor’s degree. He might, on the other hand, with such a degree take a position as head of a neurosurgical service in some general hospital in the USSR where he is needed or, if it were a very large service, as a member of its neurosurgical staff.

To earn the candidate’s degree, one must first compete by examination for one of the few available training positions at one of the three institutes in Moscow, Leningrad or Kiev. This includes an oral and written examination in medicine, an examination in a foreign language and also one on dialectical materialism or communist philosophy. Before being eligible to apply, the applicant must have had at least three years of hospital surgical experience. Many of those accepted have already had some previous neurosurgical experience. Once he receives the appointment, he is called an aspirant and he