

"This is, in fact, the reason we have come - in order to look into the matter," said E.I. Ghazov, the USSR Minister of Public Health, when we met. "Clearly, the northern regions have not shaken off the old viewpoint of the "leftover" [low-priority] principle that was previously used in financing public medicine. But funds - very considerable funds - are now being distributed, and we are hoping for even more substantial increases in the future. We are disturbed by the fact that the return on these allocations has been so meagre - a fact that is confirmed by the numerous complaints from working people that are arriving at the ministry."

We are deep inside Yakutia, in the city of Mirnyi, in Polyclinic No. 10; in front of the doctors' offices is a line up of mothers with small children in their arms.

"I am a housewife," says T. Samus', "I can't even think about working. I have three children and severe colds are common visitors in our house. My youngest child was seriously ill and I had to travel a thousand kilometres to Moscow in order to see a doctor."

R. Shafeeva, the head of a polyclinic for children explains the situation in simple terms: there are not enough specialists and the necessary equipment and medicines are not available. Listening to this conversation, I. Mestnikov, the Minister of Public Health of the Yakut ASSR, lowered his gaze - and with good reason. Who, if not his ministry, is responsible for supplying the interior with qualified personnel? Last year, 750 doctors and more than a thousand nurses and assistant nurses quit the public health service of the autonomous republic.

As for the equipment... We carried out an experiment in Mirnyi; we asked one and the same question