

On Tombstone

Vlad Zayas, MD

POOR COUNTESS. AND, YES, POOR DR. SNEGIREV. IT IS ONE thing is to have an unhappy patient rate you poorly on the internet site, or to have your nod toward an unconventional therapy published in the local newspaper, and quite another—to have a negative surgical outcome to be immortalized on a tombstone.

Since childhood, I was fascinated by this tombstone in Donskoi Monastery in Moscow, Russia. Somehow, the Monastery and the graveyard survived almost unmolested the decades of the Soviet era. The graveyard was a common burial place for Moscow aristocracy since the 18th century.

Who was poor Dr. Snegirev? I am not the only one wandering about this. Russian writer Grigory Chkhartashvili in his book *Graveyard Stories* imagines an unhappy ghost in a white lab coat haunting the graveyard in Donskoi Monastery. Probably, it was Vladimir Fiodorovich Snegirev (1847-1917), Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology. He is frequently referred to as a founding father of the Russian OBGYN school. His illustrious academic career is beyond the purpose of this brief report. Several authors mention the case of the countess *en passant*. In Dr. Snegirev's biography published in 1950 the author includes a photograph of the tombstone offering no details of the case. The most convincing fact, though, is something V.F. Snegirev said in his speech at the First Congress of the Russian Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in 1904. The speech itself is quite fascinating. It summarizes successes and failures of his 30 years in practice. Close to the end of the speech, while describing the lack of trust of the patients in their surgeons, he laments: "...sometimes they went as far as putting tombstones on the graves, announcing 'under this rock lies body N. cut down by the surgeon N.!' (Translated by the author).

It is possible that it was V.F. Snegirev himself immortalized on this tombstone. It is possible, however, that there are some medical records waiting to be discovered to provide the proof for this speculation.

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COUNTESS
OLGA LVOVNA
SHAKHOVSKAYA
BOURNE JANUARY 6, 1850
DIED DECEMBER 26, 1884

AFTER THE SURGERY PERFORMED BY DR.SNEGIREV