

First Ladies' Pool Report #1
Wednesday Sept. 28, 1994

Mrs. Clinton and Mrs. Yeltsin arrived at Georgetown University Hospital at 11:30 a.m. - about 30 minutes late from their double date with the two presidents at the Library of Congress. Mrs. Yeltsin wore a dusky rose suit and beige pumps; Mrs. Clinton wore a navy knit suit with gold buttons, a patterned scarf fastened on her shoulder with a gold frog pin and navy pumps.

They were welcomed by hospital officials, then visited the pediatric playroom. Patients gathered amid toys and puzzles to chat with them were Gabrielle Barnett, 17 months old, of Camp Springs, Md., who has a kidney ailment; Brianna Winters, 6, of Alexandria, Va., who has diabetes; Ari Meridy, 1, of Silver Spring, Md., who has a swollen eye; Maria Bowker, 15, of Springfield, Va., who has had two kidney transplants; Oscar Reiken, 12, of Arlington, Va., who has lupus and recently suffered a stroke.

"Hello, how are you all?" Mrs. Clinton said as the two first ladies arrived. Mrs. Clinton knelt down to chat with Gabrielle, who was in a stroller. "I love that name," she said. Tapping the child's bandaged hand, she asked, "Is that where the IV was? You are very brave." Little Ari was wearing blue pajamas and waving a red plastic spoon. "He's making us lunch," Mrs. Clinton said. "Oscar, how are you," she said to Reiken, who was attached to several IVs and was unresponsive. Mrs. Yeltsin, meanwhile, was talking to Brianna through an interpreter. Mrs. Clinton talked to each of the children; she squatted down next Brianna, rubbing the child's back with her left hand. "How are you doing?" she asked Maria. "I wanted Mrs. Yeltsin to see how children are treated in our hospitals," Mrs. Clinton said. "They don't have the resources that we do."

Next, the two first ladies were escorted to the pediatric ICU by Dr. Gabriel Hauser, director of the pediatric ICU, and Dr. Owen Rennert, chairman of the pediatrics department. In ICU, the two women went into a unit where a 19-year-old patient with severe lung and kidney disease was being treated with a high-tech support system called ECMO (extra-corporeal membrane oxygenation). Dr. Hauser explained that it is essentially an artificial heart, lung and kidney machine. Both women shook their heads in silent amazement as he described its functions; the patient was inert and apparently unconscious. "How much for everything?" Mrs. Yeltsin asked Dr. Hauser. "A few thousand dollars," he said. "How many?" she asked. He said he didn't know, but that the real expense involves the huge team of doctors, nurses, therapists who must monitor the patient. "We have everything else, but this machine is what we need," said Mrs. Yeltsin.

Back at the ICU nurses' station, Dr. Rennert described the many computer monitors, including one that displayed the "wave form" of a patient undergoing heart surgery at that very moment.

The women stopped to chat with your pool. "I liked everything I have seen - unique equipment," Mrs. Yeltsin said. "They take great care of patients here, great care of children." She also mentioned the "charming people."

"I would like to take this piece of America back with me," Mrs. Yeltsin said.

Mrs. Clinton, asked if the two have been having a good time, said, "We have been having a very good time together. I have enjoyed it because Mrs. Yeltsin is very concerned about a lot of the same issues that I am concerned about, particularly health and especially children's health. So we talk about that and we talk about food and flowers and children and husbands. We have a very good relationship that I value very much."

Asked if she's begun thinking about renewing the health-reform crusade next year, Mrs. Clinton said, "We are certainly thinking about health-care reform because the issues are not going to go away... Hospitals are going to be under continuing pressure because of the financing. But the real issues are the people issues - the families of our country and their health needs. Those needs are not going to go away and so the president and I are not going to go away. We will continue to talk about what great special privileges Americans have because of the health-care system we enjoy, but how the way we finance it and the fact we do leave millions of our fellow citizens out of access to quality health care is something we have to address and so we will continue to work on that."

Should we believe what we hear about you not leading the reform charge next year? your pool asked. "Oh, I don't think you should believe everything you read, do you?" Mrs. Clinton replied. "I think the important thing is that there are millions of Americans - it's not just one or two people - who know that we need to make changes and they will all continue to work together to try to create an environment in which positive change can take place." Mrs. Clinton strode away, then Mrs. Yeltsin approached the pool and, through her interpreter, commended Mrs. Clinton for her work on behalf of health reform.

Next stop: the Kennedy Center, where Mrs. Clinton and Mrs. Yeltsin toured the grand foyer with Kennedy Center chairman James Wolfensohn, then ducked into the theaters before watching a private performance of excerpts from choreographer Twyla Tharp's *New Dances in the Terrace Theater*.

In the grand foyer, they spoke again with your pool. Mrs. Yeltsin seemed awed by the building. "This is very magnificent and unique," she said. "Only a very rich country can afford buildings so luxurious. This testifies to your richness."

Mrs. Clinton talked again about health reform. Asked what went wrong, she said, "What's important is what went right and what's going to go on in the future, because health-care reform is now on the national agenda and that is a big step forward for our country. I am very committed to doing whatever I can to make sure that the families that I personally met - the more than a million people who wrote to me about their health-care needs - all of the stories that I have heard over the past 20 months are not

forgotten, because the problems will not go away and ... we need to do better. That will continue to be an issue that I care very much about and work on for the foreseeable future. This is along-term problem and it's a problem that has developed over decades. ... I can't predict exactly how it will turn out, but the problems that were identified will not get any better on their own."

Told she doesn't look bitter or despondent, as some have described her post-reform death mood, she said, "I'm not. This has been an extraordinary experience and I feel very lucky to have been a part of the national debate about health-care reform because there's not amore important domestic issue that confronts every one of us. It is an ongoing challenge, but I am very pleased at how farwe have come with this debate and I amalso very confident that eventually our country will resolve the financing problems, which are the real problems in our health-care system." After a quick lunch (which pool did not see) of cucumber sandwiches, salmon and salad, the two first ladies and entourages took their seats in the seventh row of the otherwise vacant Terrace Theater.

Twyla Tharp introduced the excerpts by asking, "What does it mean to be an American?" She described the performance as a refelection of "an American sense of perpetual possibilities."

The first dance, to a Wynton Marsalis composition, was ballétic and graceful. The company, in mostly black tights, t-shirts and leotards, included John Selya, Stacy Caddell, Petter Jacobsson, Melinda DeChiazza, David Porter, Shawn Stevens, Shawn Mahoney. The second dance, to In the Still of the Night, was a doo-wop influenced bopper that included some line dancing. Mrs. Clinton watched raptly; Mrs. Yeltsin seemed weary. Next came a jazzy performance a Duke Ellington tune, featuring Tharp and the male dancers; then the whole company in a solemn performance to the Battle Hymn of the Republic. The first ladies then went onstage to talk to the dancers. "Thank you for doing this. I am so grateful," said Mrs. Clinton. Shawn Stevens said she was from Hope, Ark. and Little Rock; Mrs. Clinton asked, "Who did you study with?" Mrs. Clinton shook maybe 30 hands outside the Kennedy Center on departure; Mrs. Yeltsin had left solo to visit another hospital.

Judy Keen
USA TODAY