

World Health Day

This celebration took place on April 7, 1961 and Dr. M. G. Candau, Director-General of the World Health Organization, gave the following address on that occasion :

“ In the world today, accidents cause more deaths than any single illness except cancer and cardiovascular disease. In many countries accidents kill more children from 5 to 19 than all other causes combined. They take a greater toll in young lives than any war the world has yet known.

Yet accidents have been less studied than has any fatal disease of equal gravity. It is only recently that scientific research on this subject has been undertaken.

Too many people still unthinkingly accept accidents as misfortunes over which the individual has no control. ‘ Accidents will happen ’, they say, as if that excused everything. Yet whenever studies are made of accidents in home or school, on the road, in factory or farm, or of any other sort of accident, ways can always be found to reduce their number and seriousness. -

Accidents are not chance events, they do not just ‘ happen ’. Every one of them is the outcome of a chain of causes and most of them can be prevented.

There is evidence that the majority of accidents happen in situations which are generally thought to be ‘ safe ’. About half of all accidents happen in the home, and children are the principal victims. Two-fifths of all fatal accidents to children between one

and four years of age take place in or around the home. Prominent causes are burns and poisoning which, even if not fatal, are generally serious. Yet almost all could be avoided by a little extra vigilance and a few simple precautions.

A thousand people a day die on the world's roads—half of all accident deaths. Road accidents are the most talked-about and most written-about of all, yet little is really known of the multiple factors which interact to produce them. In only one or two countries have present prevention measures done more than stop the road accident rate from rising faster than the increase in vehicles or miles driven. Much more needs to be known about the principles underlying road safety.

Occupational accidents have been more thoroughly studied than any others, and in many industries strict safety regulations are enforced. Notwithstanding this, in the United States of America alone it is estimated that in 1959 the working time lost because of accidents was 220 million man-days.

Here, then, is one of mankind's greatest scourges. Yet in our era of scientific progress, we have scarcely begun to think about combating it. Accidents have more in common with diseases than the simple fact that both can be deadly. The epidemiological methods used to study the distribution of disease can usefully be applied to them, but uniform methods of accident reporting must first be adopted. It will then become possible to define the situations in which they are likely to occur, in the same way as for the etiology of diseases.

It is not suggested that such research is easy, but it can and must be carried much further than at present. In the meantime there is still much that can be done. Most countries already have a safety code for road users; they have legislation intended to reduce occupational accidents and also, in some cases, regulations concerning the safety of home appliances, electric fittings, and so on.

The best present hope of accident prevention is certainly through safety education. Innumerable accidents are due, at least in part, to some action or omission of the victim himself—the pedestrian who crosses the road without looking; the boy who tries to change

a fuse without turning off the current ; the workman who fails to observe the factory's safety rules. Safety should, of course, be taught in schools, but also in factories, on the farm, and, perhaps most important of all, in the home.

In economically developed countries some progress has now been made—accident statistics are recorded although not in a uniform way ; there is some safety legislation ; there are accident prevention societies with active local committees ; and education against accidents has been begun. But what of those countries in the process of rapid industrialization, which do not yet have any statistics to guide them, where legislation is insufficient or not enforced, and where the idea that anything at all can be done to prevent accidents is accepted only by the few ? To them I would say : Face up to this situation and act quickly, avoid the bitter mistakes made in those countries where industrialization began over a century ago, and profit from the knowledge that they are now beginning to accumulate.

On World Health Day 1961, I would urge all peoples, whatever their stage of economic progress, to open their eyes to the plain fact that accidents have now become a leading cause of death, disablement and economic loss, and to realize, once and for all, that *accidents need not happen*."
