

M I S C E L L A N E O U S

THE STUDY OF REFUGEE PROBLEMS

The European Association for the Study of Refugee Problems (Strasbourg) and the Association for the Study of the World Refugee Problem (Vaduz), held their joint annual congress first at Salonica, then at Athens, from October 15 to 22, 1961. They elected Mr. H. Coursier, of the legal department of the ICRC, joint-president for a period of three years.

The congress decided to merge these two institutions. Study groups have been set up whose purpose it is to examine the various problems arising from the movement of refugees. The work of committees of international experts is strictly objective, free from any political leanings and is devoted to contributing towards humane solutions of these disturbing problems.

Five years ago in Helsinki one of these study groups led by the regretted Walter Schätzel, the then director of the Institute of International Law in Bonn, formulated the doctrine of the right to one's native soil, a notion of the greatest importance to refugees and stateless persons. This right was expressly recognized last August in New York by the United Nations, when it adopted the Convention on the elimination or the reduction of cases of stateless persons. This surely proves that theoretical studies can have a beneficial influence on the development of ideas and consequently, on the decisions of Governments.

RESEARCH IN MENTAL HEALTH

The World Health Organization convened an Expert Committee on Mental Health which made available the results of an international enquiry into what has been done and what remains to be

accomplished in this sphere¹. One can soon see from the report which has been drawn up, that the present knowledge of mental health is limited chiefly to the treatment of those already ill. More important fields, such as the prevention of mental troubles and remedies which need to be applied in cases of social inadaptability, are as yet unexplored.

The reason for this is that the problems are complex, the research needed to solve them involving scientists of many disciplines, laboratories in large centres, and populations of different cultural, religious, and racial backgrounds. Further progress will require a great increase in international co-operation.

What research is needed? The Expert Committee lists a number of subjects of high priority. First, the study of brain function, requiring scientists trained in the special methods of neurochemistry and neurophysiology, and space and apparatus to be found only in well-equipped research institutes and universities. Concurrent biological, social and psychological studies should be carried out on the same group of patients by a well co-ordinated team of scientists from each of these disciplines, and the information gained, the technical problems encountered, the solutions sought and found should be made internationally known.

Research is also needed into the epidemiology of mental disorders. In this field there should (but does not) exist a standard set of terms to describe the phenomena by which a case may be defined. These descriptive terms must be translatable into several languages. Symptoms must be identified by an objective method of observation and not by intuition —by behaviour, by a simple, cheap laboratory test, or by a psychological test not dependent on education or language—, and they should be of a type that can be identified by a technical worker or “interviewer” and yield data that can be coded by a processing machine. Furthermore, the diagnostic criteria must include additional features that may be detectable by closer observation, thus permitting first a rough classification into large groups and later a finer classification.

Even if there was greater standardization of terminology, however, comparison between epidemiological studies would be

¹ See *WHO Chronicle*, Geneva, October 1961, from which the information given below has been extracted.

difficult because there is so much variation in the approach to field studies. Consequently, there should be a formulation of key concepts by groups working intensively on pilot studies of a population, and international conferences should discuss these concepts and work out methods that could then be tried out in the field.

Change is characteristic of the modern world, and many of the changes undergone by society are not necessarily to its advantage. How, without undue interference with the way of life and natural development of the people, can the unacceptable or psychologically traumatic features of change be avoided? The Expert Committee felt that a first step towards an answer would be a social study of a community scheduled for industrialization. The study should lay stress on family life, individual behaviour patterns, the incidence of mental illness, and ways of dealing with deviant behaviour. It should be continued while the change to industrialization is taking place, and afterwards while the community is settling down to its new mode of life. Such a study should be made, not in one country only, but in several simultaneously, and the methodology co-ordinated internationally.

The study of personal relations within groups of patients in the hospital, between staff members, and between patients and staff has led to great changes in ward administration in some North American and European hospitals. Are the conclusions reached of universal validity? To find out whether they are or not, the studies need to be repeated to make sure that "group relations" are really improved in the hospital where the changes have been made—in other words, that the changes have not merely masked the old tensions, leaving them still existing but now expressed in new forms. At the same time, studies should be made in countries where the cultural pattern is different from that of North America and Europe, to see whether the same administrative changes bring about the same alterations in the environment of the ward everywhere, and especially whether people suspicious of group endeavour can make a system based on "improved group relations" work. Here again, international co-operation is required, in the exchange of techniques, the training of research workers, and the carrying out of the projects.

Other important subjects of research are the ecology of mental illness, problems of aging, the effect of nutrition on the mental health of a population, and genetics. In the search of the many differing causes of mental illness, there is a tendency to neglect the study of the natural history of the various forms of mental disorder and deviant behaviour in their social, cultural and climatic background. In a world where, as the general health improves, the proportion of old people in the population increases, more knowledge is needed about the physical, social, and psychological factors that contribute to the occurrence and aggravation of mental disorder in the aged. Surprisingly little research has been carried out on the relation between nutritional deficiencies and mental illness, in spite of the known effects of such deficiencies in pellagra and some forms of "alcoholic psychosis". Studies are needed on the effect of nutrition on the course of mental illness and on the incidence and course of mental illness in populations with poor nutritional standards (with observation of whatever changes may take place as nutrition improves). Genetics too have not been the subject of much research in the field of mental health. Recent advances in this branch of knowledge could presumably contribute to psychiatric prevention and treatment, and studies on the "chemical pattern" in mental patients and their families should be undertaken.

Research is urgently needed in many other fields. On mental health promotion, for example, in which the Expert Committee held, "not only is there a lack of knowledge on effective techniques for achieving the goal of making healthy people even healthier and of building up resistance to mental illness, but at present some of the efforts expended may have an effect contrary to that intended". On therapy, for the "current methods for treating behaviour problems in children, and anti-social and neurotic behaviour in adults, are so time-consuming that we cannot hope to have enough psychiatrists, or their associates from other professions, to treat all those who need treatment". Research is also needed on administration of mental health programmes, the size of mental hospitals, the communicability of mental illness, child development, and still other subjects.