

WORLD HEALTH PROBLEMS

During the fifteenth World Health Assembly in Geneva in May 1962, which was attended by numerous delegates and at which the International Committee of the Red Cross was represented, Dr. M. G. Candau presented his report on the work of the World Health Organization, of which he is Director-General. He spoke of the progress made in the world-wide malaria eradication programme and of the mass campaigns against the communicable diseases with which WHO will continue to be concerned for many years to come. He then referred to the problem of environmental sanitation, stating that there can be no hope of complete success in campaigns against disease unless the conditions of environmental sanitation in which 80% of the world's inhabitants are living can be considerably improved.

Dr. Candau went on to deal at some length with the Organization's efforts to stimulate and co-ordinate research in medicine and public health, and with the education and training of medical, paramedical and auxiliary personnel. The second of these questions, he said, is of fundamental importance to the countries which have just become, or are about to become, independent :

“ Certainly the plans for social and economic development generally cover expansion and improvement of existing health services, but there are some cases where it will be necessary practically to start from the beginning and create such services, or completely reorganize them. The success of such an undertaking depends to a large extent on the availability of qualified personnel. This means that the training of national personnel is a matter of urgency, whether such training be provided in the country of origin or abroad, or both.

“ Too many countries still depend on foreign personnel to fill the key posts in their health services. Independence in this field is certainly the final aim, but to achieve it the level of general education must be sufficiently high, and this is a long and expensive process.

“ For this reason it is encouraging to know that there is in the world a common fund of goodwill which enables the newly independent nations to profit from the invaluable professional experience which some privileged countries have accumulated over the centuries.

“ Nevertheless . . . I believe that in this connexion certain reservations are imperative: there may be certain disadvantages in making too much use of foreign-study fellowships for the training of health personnel. The student who arrives in a foreign country is subjected to complete physical and social change and if he is not sufficiently mature mentally this change may expose him to a serious risk in so far as the success of his studies is concerned. Moreover, he will often be taking a training course in a social and cultural environment which is entirely different from that to which he will be returning so that on his return he may find himself ‘ out of step ’. In addition, this phenomenon will be aggravated if, as is often the case, he is required to exercise his profession in isolation far from any cultural centre.

“ All this shows how important it is that countries should receive the assistance necessary to enable them to organize their medical training by the creation of their own schools of medicine. This . . . is no small task: it requires not only a great deal of money but also—and above all—qualified teaching staff, which it is not easy to find. In Africa, for example, it will certainly be some years before such an enterprise can achieve its objectives. In the meantime, WHO is making every effort to assist the few schools of medicine which happily already exist so that they may rapidly achieve their maximum output.

“ Passing now to the question of auxiliary personnel, there is no doubt that such personnel has a paramount role to play in the development of the health services in all countries. Nevertheless, they can only be used to the full under the constant supervision of qualified medical and paramedical staff and, as we have seen, the training of this national qualified staff, which will often be taking over from the international personnel, is a long process.

“ This time factor is one of the most frequent reasons why governments hesitate to make a frontal attack upon this problem of the training of health personnel. I have noted with apprehension that this hesitation is often shared by certain international or bilateral organizations or institutions which give preference to short-time projects liable to produce quick—but superficial—results rather than undertake long-term programmes whose results are more enduring but less spectacular in the immediate future. This refers, for example, to study fellowships. A fellowship of a few weeks is often accorded to enable a physician to go and study a very specialized subject for which he is not in fact basically prepared. It is evident that this type of fellowship cannot pay worthwhile dividends. Moreover, such practices are dangerous since they may give the developing countries the impression that medical training, and particularly specialization, can be obtained by easy short cuts. If there is one thing we must at all costs avoid in our profession, it is a facile

approach: I mean that in the field of medical training, there must be thoroughness and continuity.

“ Without wishing to enter into statistical details, I will cite as an example the situation in Africa as it appears in the light of a survey which we undertook in 12 countries of the Region. In a territory with about 150 million inhabitants there is on an average one physician per 20 000 inhabitants. If this figure is to be doubled in 20 years—that is, if there is to be one physician per 10 000 inhabitants—it will be necessary, taking into account the increase in the population, for more than 1000 young physicians to complete the medical-school course every year for the next 20 years. Our inquiries in fact showed that the existing schools, even at their maximum output, will only be able to train less than half this minimum number . . . this example demonstrates very clearly the magnitude of one of the tasks we have taken upon ourselves : the creation of new schools of medicine.”

Turning to the question of medical research the Director-General of WHO said :

“ The exchange of scientific and medical information—which is one of our organization’s responsibilities—has a concrete and clearly defined objective : to assist countries to put into practice the discoveries and techniques of modern medicine so that the health level of all their citizens may be thereby improved.

“ To take one example only : the works of the scientists who have co-operated with us in the field of insecticides (biochemists, physiologists, geneticists, biologists, entomologists) have certainly been of value in the determination of the properties of the insecticides and pesticides at present in use and of those which it is proposed to employ in the future. However, for us the ultimate aim of their investigations has been to give practical help to those countries which are combating malaria, filariasis, etc. by means of insecticides.

“ The application of new discoveries in campaigns against specific diseases often creates new subjects for research, and it is therefore essential that the laboratory investigator and the worker in the field (who, incidentally, like Molière’s M. Jourdain, often ‘ talks prose ’ without being aware of it) should be constantly studying the efficacy of the technical means used in the battle for health.

“ Research, which plays a part in all the activities of twentieth-century man, thus takes an important place also in the programmes of our organization.

“ Since 1958, as you will see in detail in the document to be submitted to you during this session, WHO has participated in 175 research projects.

MISCELLANEOUS

This vast undertaking is gradually extending to the whole of humanity's problems in its efforts to achieve total health as it is defined in our Constitution.

"Research on communicable diseases and their vectors rightly occupies a preponderant place in this programme, together with cancer, cardiovascular diseases and malnutrition. You will note, however, that in its research programme WHO is also penetrating into the field of immunology and into the relatively new sphere of human genetics. The problems of genetics are in fact becoming increasingly important, if only from the point of view of the evaluation of the possible risks to which the reproductive cells are exposed by the changes which man himself is making in his environment. Here, as elsewhere, WHO is fulfilling its role by encouraging the training of research workers, facilitating inter-laboratory relations and supporting comparative studies of human populations."

In conclusion, Dr. Candau spoke of the critical moment in history at which the Assembly was meeting :

"The leaders of your countries are seeking means to enable us to live in a coherent and civilized world. They realize that the prodigious speeding-up of the new means of transport, the virtual conquest of space and the uncontrolled and increasing production of arms may bring the world to the brink of destruction. On the other hand, your statesmen know that science allied to technology can make the dream of universal plenty a reality for every human being. The new countries which aspire to a place in the concert of nations will not receive satisfaction unless rivalries and conflicts give way to solidarity and peaceful co-operation. They will be able to develop and become strong only with the generous and disinterested help of their more fortunate neighbours.

"In the field of health, is it not one of this Assembly's privileges to take the initiative in regard to any measures liable to improve the lot of mankind as a whole? If we act in this sense—without allowing ourselves to be deterred either by attitudes inherited from the past or by financial considerations which, although important, cannot be a determining factor—we shall have made a positive contribution to the vast move towards development which is taking shape, and which we all earnestly hope will mark a new and harmonious stage in economic and social progress."