

*ON THE OCCASION OF THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS AND  
RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES*

THE CANNES MEDICAL CONFERENCE  
(1-11 April 1919)

The Henry Dunant Society of Geneva has just published a book to mark the 75th anniversary of the Cannes Medical Conference (1-11 April 1919),<sup>1</sup> which preceded the establishment of the League of Red Cross Societies on 5 May of the same year.<sup>2</sup>

The first part contains the texts of the speeches delivered in Cannes on 9 April 1994, when a commemorative plaque was laid at the Town Hall. The speakers were Mr Michel Mouillot, Mayor of Cannes, Mr Roger Durand, President of the Henry Dunant Society, Mr George Weber, Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Mr André Delaude, President of the French Red Cross, Mr Rodolphe de Haller, member of the ICRC, Mr Philippe Michel, President of the *Association suisse du mimosa du bonheur* and Director of the Geneva Red Cross, Mrs Janine Nolant, President of the Cannes Committee of the French Red Cross, and Mr François Payot, President of the Geneva Red Cross.

The second and third parts of the book contain contributions by Red Cross and other experts on the subject of the Cannes Medical Conference and the medical and social welfare activities of the components of the Movement from the earliest days of the Red Cross up to the present.

The most significant features of these contributions are enumerated below.

In his paper Roger Durand, after recapitulating a series of milestones in the history of the Red Cross since the battle of Solferino, goes on to give a summary

---

<sup>1</sup> *La Conférence médicale de Cannes, 1<sup>er</sup>-11 avril 1919*, Roger Durand *et al.*, Henry Dunant Society, Geneva, 1994, 208 pp.

<sup>2</sup> With regard to the commemorative ceremonies in Cannes and Paris, see *IRRC*, No. 807, May-June 1994, pp. 279-284.

of the work of the Cannes Medical Conference in April 1919. As François Bugnion, Deputy Director of the ICRC Department of Principles, Law and Relations with the Movement, writes further on, “The Conference was ambitious, being imbued with the spirit of Wilsonian idealism: it set out to encourage the study of disease and measures to promote public health, maternal and child welfare, the education and training of nurses, and precautions against tuberculosis, venereal diseases, malaria and other infectious and chronic diseases, and to facilitate the provision of emergency aid in case of fire, famine, pestilence, etc.”

The Conference, which was attended by some sixty eminent members of the medical profession from the five nations that had emerged victorious from the First World War - Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan and the United States - unanimously adopted eleven resolutions concerning the main public health problems of the time, and its proceedings were widely reported in the international press.

An exhaustive account of the work of the Conference, published in the *Bulletin of the League of Red Cross Societies* (N° 2, 1 June 1919), is reproduced at the end of the article by R. Durand.

Jean Guillermand, pneumo-phthisiologist to the hospitals of the French Armed Forces and former administrator of the French Red Cross, describes the relations between the American Red Cross and the French medical corps. These relations developed significantly during the First World War, especially when volunteer American Red Cross nurses came to France to serve in military and civilian units. While expressing regret that participation in the Cannes Conference was limited to the five victorious countries, thus excluding other leading figures of the medical world, the author notes that the Conference had the merit of strengthening the links between French and American medicine.

The Cannes Conference “gave a tremendous impetus to international recognition of the nursing profession by establishing a really universal programme of nursing care”, writes Mireille Desrez, President of the *Association Henry Dunant/France* and former National Director of Nurses and Social Workers of the French Red Cross.

After describing the situation and activities of French nurses during and after the First World War and pointing out that nursing was one of the subjects to which the Cannes Conference gave priority, this author concludes by expressing the view that public health nursing still has a long road to travel in the face of such new phenomena of our society as AIDS, drug addiction, cancer, ostracism, loneliness, etc., all situations in which nurses have a vital role to play.

The third part, more historical in character, first deals with the health-related activities of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies from 1919 to the present. In his contribution, George Weber recalls the circumstances in which the Cannes Conference was convened and then the early days

of the League, which “were both febrile and difficult”, since the organization was obliged at the very outset to launch a large-scale relief operation in Poland where a typhus epidemic was raging. That action prompted a vast cooperative effort among Red Cross Societies, but the League’s operation was hampered by the fact that its profile and *raison d’être* were not yet clearly defined. In 1921, in response to the famine that was sweeping Russia, the League and the ICRC launched a joint appeal which gave rise to a huge international relief operation. The League subsequently conducted relief actions in all parts of the world, while its Secretariat helped the National Societies to step up their activities in the areas of hygiene, nursing and work with young people.

During the Second World War, the League was primarily concerned with refugee problems, while the National Societies considerably developed their nursing staff. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as a whole endeavoured to help people in countries affected by malnutrition and epidemics.

From 1948, the League undertook many operations in behalf of refugees and extended its aid programmes all over the world. The author mostly concentrates on demonstrating the development of trends and methods of action by means of a large number of examples.

The main areas in which the National Societies are now developing their activities are those of prevention of natural disasters, nutrition and health care. The Federation also takes part in development programmes in the fields of maternal and child health, AIDS prevention, nursing and social welfare. In regard to both health care and development activities, “the Federation endeavours ... to spread the light of science and the warmth of human sympathy to all corners of the earth”, in order to attain its objective of “health for all by the year 2000”.

In the next article, François Bugnion reviews with the role of the International Committee of the Red Cross in health protection. He recalls that after his experience at Solferino Henry Dunant set as his major objective the establishment of societies for giving care to the wounded and the adoption of an “international principle, sanctioned by a Convention inviolate in character” to protect the wounded and all those who endeavour to come to their aid. The author goes on to stress the importance of the Second International Conference of National Aid Societies for the Nursing of the War Wounded, held in Berlin in 1869, which adopted a resolution imposing on aid societies the obligation to take advantage of peacetime years to prepare themselves for helping the wounded in the event of war. From that time on, the Red Cross has played a decisive part in combating disease and epidemics, and François Bugnion draws attention to the “spectacular development of Red Cross action during the First World War”.

At that time the ICRC was concentrating its efforts on the protection of prisoners of war, of whom there were millions, but it was also active in campaigns to control epidemics “in areas where such action was dictated by its traditional

role as a neutral intermediary". From 15 to 16 April 1919 in Vienna the institution convened under its auspices a Governmental Conference for the Control of Epidemics, attended by the heads of health services of several countries in Central and Eastern Europe. This Conference decided to set up a central office for combating epidemics in Eastern Europe, which led to the "establishment of a continuous chain of monitoring and disinfecting stations at all major transit points, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, while properly equipped health teams were sent to deal with centres of epidemics in Byelorussia, Russia and the Ukraine".

During the Second World War, assistance to the wounded was essentially provided by army health services, and the National Red Cross Societies played only an auxiliary role. After the war, coordination of epidemic control measures was entrusted to an intergovernmental body, the World Health Organization, but the Red Cross remained active wherever there were needs that State services were unable to cover, "... especially those which call for a humanitarian rather than a medical approach and can better be met by volunteers than by officials".

The ICRC for its part continued to develop its activities in the areas covered by its mandate, namely protection of and assistance to victims of the fighting and the war disabled. The institution tried as far as possible to support the medical and hospital structures of the parties to the conflict rather than to set up its own hospitals with the help of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and it opened dispensaries near the combat zones to help the wounded and facilitate their evacuation. It also tried to prevent epidemics, especially by protecting water supplies, and established orthopaedic workshops for the manufacture of prostheses and the rehabilitation of the disabled. In conclusion, turning to the problems raised by the AIDS epidemic, François Bugnion asks this question: "Would it not be appropriate for the International Movement to launch a new appeal, comparable to the one launched by Henry Dunant from the battlefield of Solferino, for a general mobilization of forces against this disease?"

The reader will find some interesting information in other contributions — on the town of Cannes, on the activities of the Cannes Committee of the French Red Cross and especially on its health care facilities, manned by volunteers — general practitioners, radiologists, biologists, nurses, etc.

And what could be more refreshing than to read the story of the *mimosa du bonheur*, describing how in 1948 the Cannes Rotary Club sent some mimosa to the directors of the Swiss *Chaîne du Bonheur* (a fund-raising organization) and to the Geneva Red Cross to thank them for what the city of Geneva did for the children of Cannes during the 1939-1945 war? Since then the annual sale of mimosa has become one of the most popular humanitarian fund-raising events in French-speaking Switzerland.

*Françoise Perret*