

The real problems—national sovereignty, the nature of international relations—go beyond the confines of any State, however large, taken in isolation.

In the final analysis, it is from the degree of maturity attained by the international community, from the convergence of genuine interests of the States and, no doubt, also from a certain humane philosophy transcending economic and ideological interests, that hope may be derived for a solution to these problems and, in consequence, to the difficulties encountered by international emergency aid. The question is not academic. Too many victims, alas, can testify to that.

THE STORY OF BLINDNESS PREVENTION

We mentioned in our April 1976 issue that the theme chosen in 1976 for World Health Day was "Foresight Prevents Blindness". In this connection, WHO published "The Story of Blindness Prevention" by John Bland. Excerpts from this article are given below :

The earliest medical records known to us, derived from the ancient river cultures of Mesopotamia, show that even 5000 years ago medical care for the eyes was a speciality in its own right. The Hammurabian Code, discovered in 1902 by archaeologists working at Susa, itemized Sumerian Laws from about 3000 B.C. which included an indication that eye surgery must have been as perilous for the surgeon as for the patient. A surgeon was forbidden to charge more than 10 sheckels of silver for a successful eye operation; but if the operation failed, the surgeon would have his hands chopped off.

A papyrus discovered at Thebes, the ancient capital of Egypt, names 20 eye diseases, and the Greek historian Herodotus, who visited Egypt in the fifth century B.C., met doctors there who specialized in ophthalmology because of the high incidence of blinding diseases.

Nevertheless it was a particularly bad time in human history to be blind, since the most that sightless people could hope for was to be successful beggars. There are even undeniable indications that impoverished parents sometimes blinded their own children deliberately to give them extra appeal as waifs.

It seems likely that in very primitive societies children born blind were put to death. This can be deduced from the numerous injunctions in early religious writings to be humane to the blind. But the notion that blindness was a divinely inspired punishment persisted, while only in rare cases such as the poet Homer was the gift of genius proffered as a compensation.

A new era for the blind, the era of the asylum, was slow to arrive. One of the earliest special hospices established specifically for the care of the sightless is said to have been founded in the fourth century A.D. at Caesarea in Cappadocia. Saint Bertrand, a seventh century Bishop of Le Mans in France, founded an institution near Pontlieu, and William the Conqueror, the Norman king who invaded England in 1066, is credited with founding several hospices in expiation for his worldly sins.

Two centuries later, the captors of a large number of defeated crusaders backed up their demand for a huge ransom by blinding 20 prisoners for every day that the ransom went unpaid. It took 15 days. According to tradition, this tragedy inspired King Louis IX of France in 1260 to take under his royal protection an institute for the care of the blind in Paris, the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts (Fifteen-Twenties) which still exists to this day.

Unlike Japan, where the blind won practical status as masseurs, in Europe and most other parts of the world the blind continued to be regarded as wards of society. But in 1526 the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives wrote a tract on "The Subvention of the Poor" in which he suggested that the sightless should not be left unemployed but should be put to productive work to contribute towards their own support. It was a revolutionary idea and gained ground only slowly, but it marked the start of the third era for the blind, when they at last began to be integrated into society.

Much of the credit for opening the doors of education to blind people goes to a Frenchman, Valentin Haüy, who opened his Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles in Paris in 1784. His success in teaching the 12 children sent to him by a philanthropic society earned him the title of "father and apostle of the blind". After the French Revolution his school was incorporated with les Quinze-Vingts.

Haüy was also the first to use embossed paper which could be “read” by touch. The story goes that one of his first pupils, François Lesueur, was sorting papers on his teacher’s desk when he came across a card strongly indented by the printing press. He showed Haüy that he could decipher several of the letters; when Haüy traced further signs on the paper with the handle of his pen, the boy could read them.

Various experiments were made subsequently with raised or embossed letters, but it remained for Louis Braille, a blind teacher at the Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles in Paris, to develop the six-dot code which marked its one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary in May 1975 and is universally accepted today.

Among the earliest schools for the blind were those of Liverpool (1791), London (1799), Vienna (1805) and Berlin (1806). Institutions such as these meant that the blind themselves began to join forces to do something about their own situation, not only by improving the lot of those who had lost their sight but also by trying to prevent the sighted from losing their sight.

This is not to overlook the example set by gifted blind individuals like Nicholas Saunderson in the seventeenth century, who was appointed on the recommendation of Sir Isaac Newton to fill the chair of physics which Newton had himself occupied at Cambridge, or Maria Theresa von Paradis, born in Vienna in 1750, who travelled around Europe giving music recitals and was particularly concerned about the conditions of her fellow-sufferers.

The principles of integration were eventually given expression in what amounted to a “Bill of Rights of the Blind” during an International Conference at Oxford in 1949. The delegates laid down the following: “To enable blind persons to participate fully in the life of the community and to contribute to its strength, blind persons, whether children, young persons or adults, should be given full opportunity for general and vocational education in schools adequately equipped for the education of the blind and with fully qualified teachers.

“The Conference puts on record its conviction that every national system of education should ensure to all blind children education according to their interests and aptitudes at least equal to that which they would have received if they had not been blind.”

Two years later the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind (WCWB) came into being, its purpose being to provide the means of consultation among organizations of and for the blind in different countries, and wherever possible to promote joint action toward the introduction and improvement of minimum standards for the welfare

of the blind in all parts of the world. The Council has official relations with WHO and enjoys consultative status with the United Nations, UNESCO, ILO and UNICEF, and as a member of the Conference of World Organizations Interested in the Handicapped plays a part in the United Nations coordinated programme for rehabilitation of the handicapped.

WHO is playing an increasing role in the prevention of disease, with major campaigns to control such infectious diseases as trachoma and onchocerciasis. Trachoma, known for 3000 years, attacks the lining of the eyelid (conjunctiva) and the cornea (the transparent front portion of the eyeball); it is caused by a micro-organism against which antibiotics and sulfonamide drugs prove effective. Onchocerciasis, or "river blindness", is a general infection transmitted to humans by the bites of the blackfly found in large areas of Africa and in Mexico, Guatemala and Venezuela.

A resolution approved at the Twenty-eighth World Health Assembly in Geneva in May 1975 encouraged member countries "to develop national programmes for the prevention of blindness especially aimed at the control of trachoma, xerophthalmia (dryness of the conjunctiva and cornea due to Vitamin A deficiency), onchocerciasis and other causes and to introduce adequate measures for the early detection and treatment of other potentially blinding conditions such as cataract and glaucoma".

The International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness came into existence in January 1975 as an independent, nongovernmental organization to lead a world movement "for the prevention and cure of blindness and to preserve sight". Its parent bodies were the International Association for the Prevention of Blindness (which took the initiative in constituting the new Agency), the International Federation of Ophthalmic Societies, and the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind.
