

WHO *looks ahead*

The next 10 years of WHO was the theme of the sixth annual meeting of the National Citizens Committee for the World Health Organization, in St. Louis, Mo., on October 29, 1958.

Dr. Leonard W. Larson, chairman of the board of trustees of the American Medical Association, said that the principal challenges of the next 10 years will be to clarify the relationship between medicine and world peace, to control and eliminate communicable diseases, to construct hospitals and medical educational institutions in underdeveloped countries, and to train leaders on their native soil.

Dr. Leroy E. Burney, Surgeon General of the Public Health Service, cited evidence of the new and vigorous support of international health by this Nation. He observed that public health workers must have a high sense of mission in international health, a field that requires many more well-qualified workers, especially those with flexibility enough to feel at home anywhere. This means, he said, that many of us must learn to accept the entire world as our field of responsibility.

Excerpts from the St. Louis conference have been published by the National Citizens Committee in New York City. Four of the papers presented at the conference are summarized below.

Mortality From Infections Blamed on Malnutrition

Malnutrition plays a much greater role in the high mortality of young children in some areas of the world than has been hitherto appreciated, averred Dr. Nevin S. Scrimshaw, regional adviser in nutrition, Pan American Sanitary Bureau, Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization.

Scrimshaw observed that the synergistic relationship between malnutrition and infection must be understood as a basis for future control programs. The high death rate for children under 5 years of age in underdeveloped countries is often attributed to infections, but, he said, field studies suggest that perhaps a third of these children are dying with the signs and

symptoms of malnutrition, usually precipitated by an acute infectious episode. A considerable proportion of the other two-thirds, Scrimshaw added, are dying of infections which would not ordinarily be fatal to a well-nourished child.

Kwashiorkor

Efforts to reduce the incidence of kwashiorkor, a serious nutritional disease of children, were cited by Scrimshaw as evidence that the recommendations of expert WHO committees stimulate research and promote effective control.

Prior to the first meeting of the Joint Expert Committee on Nutrition of the Food and Agricultural Organization and the World Health Organization, Scrimshaw said, no one was aware that kwashiorkor had a common nature or that the syndrome resulted from protein

malnutrition. Clinicians, largely unaware of the work of others, were publishing reports in many countries. Public health authorities did not recognize the disease.

As a result of the expert committee's recommendations, researchers were sent to Africa and to Central and South America. Their reports made it evident to nutritionists, pediatricians, and persons concerned with child health in more than 60 countries in which kwashiorkor occurs that the disease was a major cause of the high mortality in preschool children and that it was a public health problem for which solutions had to be found.

Scrimshaw pointed out that solutions have been expedited by WHO's policy of providing fellowships and travel grants, seeing to it that knowledge is pooled, and trying out preventive measures on a coordinated basis. As a result, he said, first class research has been completed, human resources have been developed to combat deficiency diseases, and campaigns against protein malnutrition have "snowballed." Active work on the development of additional protein-rich foods for the supplementary and mixed feeding of infants and young children has taken place in more than 25 centers in 18 of the countries in which protein malnutrition is acute.

Other Work in Nutrition

A particular feature of WHO's program in nutrition, Scrimshaw noted, is the attention given to developing the technical capacities of individual workers in areas of great need. The real underdevelopment of the so-called technically underdeveloped countries, he said, is the shortage of persons educated and experienced in using the resources in their areas.

WHO has also made a significant contribution in the field of nutrition by using consultants. Consultants, Scrimshaw observed, are particularly useful in disseminating current knowledge to local medical and health workers and in helping countries devise plans to meet their specific needs.

Recommendations

Scrimshaw recommended that in the future WHO seek:

- To increase the number and competence of trained personnel in underdeveloped countries.

- To finance doctorate programs in public health and postdoctorate training for periods beyond the conventional year.

- To see that consultants who are brought into a region to give special assistance turn their functions over to local people as soon as possible.

- To help develop the human resources of the countries in which international agencies are working.

- To give more assistance to member countries of WHO in preventing toxicity of intentional food additives, and to help reduce acute nutritional problems which arise when there is a changeover from foods prepared by indigenous means to foods prepared in accordance with modern food technology. (Infantile beriberi occurred in the villages of some south-east Asian countries when power-driven rice mills were introduced.)

- To enlarge the permanent nutrition staffs of WHO and PASB to enable them to respond to increasing demands from health authorities for guidance.

Prognosis

Scrimshaw stated that information from studies of the effects of nutrition on differences in the prevalence of chronic disease will result in regimens conducive to greater longevity and better health in older persons.

He also envisioned nutrition as becoming an increasingly routine health activity, with current, specific nutritional problems gradually being overcome.

Emphasizes Applicability Of Basic Research

The research program of the World Health Organization should concern itself with providing as broad a scientific base as possible from which to mount successful attacks on today's major diseases, according to Dr. Walsh McDermott, professor of public health and preventive medicine at the Cornell University Medical College.

The major diseases, he said, are neither obscure nor exotic; they are commonplace diseases.