

# *Latin America's New School of Nutrition and Dietetics<sup>1</sup>*

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EARLY IN May 1961, a group of young Latin American women, each with a university degree in biology, chemistry, pharmacy, or medicine, assembled in the modern auditorium of the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama (INCAP) in Guatemala City to begin a week of orientation to the Institute's new two-year course in nutrition and dietetics. Among the six were two from Honduras and one each from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Ecuador. They were the second class to enter the school; the first, numbering seven, were already at work on their second or internship year.

During the week that followed, the new students became acquainted with their regular professors, all members of the INCAP staff. They learned about the Institute and its many projects; they had a brief survey of the curriculum they were to study; they visited the hospital and the health center where they would later serve their internship; and they were given a glimpse of Guatemala and what it has to offer in recreation and travel. By the end of the week, they were ready to start their intensive graduate training which would qualify them to enter the field of nutrition and dietetics as professionals.

## *History of INCAP*

The story of the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama, of which the School of Nutrition and Dietetics is a part, is a striking example of how important achievements can be accomplished through cooperation. In 1946, delegates from each of the five Central American countries and Panama met with representatives of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to create an organization to study the problems of nutrition in the area, to find ways to solve these problems, and to assist the member countries in applying the solutions.

<sup>1</sup>INCAP Publication I-206.

None of the member countries could have set up such a program alone, but, by pooling their resources and with the help of the PAHO and the Kellogg Foundation, INCAP was inaugurated on September 15, 1949. Dr. Nevin S. Scrimshaw, appointed Chief of the Nutrition Section of the Pan American Health Organization, became the Director of INCAP. With the cooperation of many outstanding workers from Central America and Panama, he has guided the Institute to its present eminence in the field of nutrition.

To carry out its stated objectives, INCAP has developed an extensive and ever-expanding program of scientific investigation and has worked out practical solutions to some of the most pressing nutritional problems of its member countries. These have included the iodization of crude salt to combat endemic goiter and the production of the vegetable-protein mixture, "Incaparina," which is an effective and acceptable protein-rich food made available to populations at a fraction of the cost of milk. INCAP has given its member countries other valuable assistance with their nutrition-dietetics problems and with the development of nutrition programs. Always, its primary goal is to reach the people, especially the children, of Latin America, who are living on sub-standard diets, in order to save them from malnutrition and to create a situation favorable for succeeding generations.

In working toward this goal, education has been an important phase of INCAP's endeavor. During its comparatively short existence, INCAP has trained over two hundred persons in the field of nutrition: 140 from Latin America and the remainder from some sixteen other countries around the world. This training has been accomplished in various ways. Qualified persons have been accepted as fellows to do their thesis work in the research division. Other students at the graduate level have

spent a year in research at INCAP and have been recommended for advanced study in some of the leading universities of the United States. Others have attended INCAP's Dietary Survey Training Center to learn scientific techniques for taking such surveys. Public health physicians have come to INCAP for the intensive, three-month summer course in nutrition which was started in June 1960. This course will be carried on, one year in Spanish and the next in English, as a permanent part of the INCAP program. Through conferences, through educational work in the field, through consultations with individuals and groups, this educational effort has been going on unceasingly throughout the years of INCAP's existence.

### *The Need for a Course in Nutrition and Dietetics*

Extensive as its training program has been, one vital phase of training had not yet been included in INCAP's program. With nutrition work in its infancy and with a very small group of workers to cover a vast area of underdeveloped countries in need of nutrition aid, nowhere in Latin America was there a school for training such workers. It was clear that such a school, organized in conformity with the highest professional standards, would be another means by which INCAP could fulfill its broadest objectives.

In arriving at this conclusion, due consideration was given to the fact that although many Latin Americans were going to schools in the United States for training in nutrition, there were compelling reasons why it would be better for them to be educated in an environment similar to that in which they would work. The first difficulty with United States training is that it is given in English, a language with which Latin Americans are not completely familiar. Furthermore, the standards of living and the professional recompenses in the United States are so different from those in Latin America that often United States-trained Latins have preferred to make their careers in the country in which they trained, and Latin American countries have consequently lost valuable potential assistance.

An institution in which instruction would be in Spanish and the orientation directed to the countries so greatly in need of trained nutritionists and dietitians was, therefore, of tremendous importance to the entire region.

### *The School Is Formed*

When the need for such a school was recognized by INCAP, there was considerable discussion about establishing a four-year course for undergraduates. Dr. Charlotte Young of Cornell University came twice to Guatemala as a consultant and prepared detailed suggestions as to course content, building,

equipment, and organization. Others contributed additional valuable information and advice. Unfortunately, when the costs for such a school were computed and the staffing problems surveyed, it became clear that a four-year, undergraduate school would be beyond the present resources of INCAP and its member countries. It was then decided to establish a two-year graduate school, open to persons who had already achieved a degree in biology, chemistry, pharmacy, or medicine.

The new School of Nutrition and Dietetics, it was decided, would be guided by a committee made up of staff members of INCAP and would be directed by a qualified professional in the field of nutrition and dietetics. The persons on the committee are: the Director of INCAP, Dr. Moisés Béhar; the Consultant Director, Dr. Nevin S. Scrimshaw; the Director of Training and Associate Chief, Division of Physiological Chemistry, Dr. José Méndez; the Chief of the Epidemiology Branch, Dr. Werner Ascoli; the Chief of the Dietary Survey Branch, Marina Flores; the Chief of the Nutrition Education Branch, Susana Icaza; the Administrative Officer, Boris Ibáñez; and the Director of the School, Bernice Hopkins.

### *The Curriculum*

In developing the curriculum, primary emphasis was placed on the needs of the countries which the graduates of the school would serve. Many of the suggestions made by Dr. Young were incorporated and the program of The American Dietetic Association, known throughout the world for its high training standards for nutritionists and dietitians, was also a valuable guide.

Although the students were coming with degrees in various sciences, it was recognized that their backgrounds would show varying levels of emphasis and preparation. It was decided, therefore, that a basic review course in biochemistry and physiology would be essential. Recognizing also that Latin American universities do not stress the social sciences, it was considered highly important to include courses in anthropology, sociology, psychology, and



*Frequent seminars for the students are held with the participation of Director Dr. Nevin Scrimshaw (now Consultant Director) and the author, who is Director of the School*



human relations. Finally, because business management of food services often comes within the scope of the dietitian and consultant nutritionist, the curriculum was to include principles of economics, organization and management, budgeting, personnel management, and time and motion studies.

Needless to say, one of the primary areas for training is foods, and here, what a change in approach was necessary from the conventional curriculum in the United States! Most of the students, although university graduates, had never cooked or even helped in the kitchen. Thus the courses had to start with the most fundamental matters, such as selection, procurement, simple preparation, and service of food. These formed a background for the advanced courses which include: quantitative cookery, diet therapy, food service management for institutions, and food sanitation. Carrying all of these subjects into the area of public health, the curriculum includes nutrition education in public health, principles of statistics, epidemiology, public health practice, and dietary surveys.

The first year, composed of 49 credit hours based on the semester system, is largely academic. It is divided into trimesters of two sixteen-week and one twelve-week periods. The credit system is the same as that used in universities in the United States with the twelve-week period resembling summer sessions.

The second year of the course involves an internship comprised of six months, spent in a public health center and six months in hospitals. On an alternating basis, half of the class goes into public health work, while the other half goes into hospital internship.

For the hospital experience, the facilities of the Roosevelt Hospital in Guatemala and Gorgas and Corozal hospitals in the Canal Zone are used. As in hospital internships in the United States, students receive experience in the main kitchen, the office of

the dietary department, and in pediatric, medical, surgical, and obstetrical services. Since malnutrition is recognized as an important problem among many Latin American women during pregnancy and lactation, more emphasis is placed on this phase of the internship than it is in the States.

For the public health half of the internship, a most interesting project has been developed. In cooperation with the Guatemalan National Public Health Department and its local division, an integrated applied nutrition program has been initiated in the small Guatemalan town of Chimaltenango. The program's objectives are:

(a) To develop an integrated program of nutrition at the local level in Chimaltenango.

(b) To provide training in the field of nutrition in public health for the students of the School of Nutrition and Dietetics of INCAP.

The details of this program are too numerous to recount in this article, but the students assist in planning diets for individuals, assist teachers in making lesson plans in nutrition, help the agricultural extension service in the community in relation to nutritional problems, give daily consultation and instruction to the staff of the Health Center itself, and work directly with members of the community, mostly the women, giving instruction in foods and food preparation. In addition, they learn the techniques of dietary surveying by actually doing such surveys.

The faculty of the School of Nutrition and Dietetics is composed largely of the professional staff of INCAP, men and women with excellent scientific training and wide experience. In addition, professors from San Carlos University cover such subjects as psychology and human relations. The American School of Guatemala contributes a teacher for principles of education; and practicing physicians and dentists give some class sessions. The Pan American Health Organization staff also give valuable teaching assistance in all subjects of public health and sanitation. Frequently, special lecturers,



*Marina Flores conducts a class in techniques of dietary surveys*



*Six months of the one-year internship are spent working in the public health center of an Indian village in Guatemala*

some from various member countries, give discourses on their specializations.

Once a week, the second-year students who are in Guatemala assemble at INCAP for seminar discussions, for a meeting with the Director of INCAP and the Director of the School, and for the review of current literature in the field of nutrition. This is a particularly valuable aspect of the program, for it serves to place in proper perspective the class work and the field experience.

The students, the focus of all this planning and preparation, are an interesting group. In the first class, who have just completed their year of internship, were seven young women from four different countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Panama. All had previous work experience as laboratory assistants, pharmacists, or science teachers. Their attitudes were serious and dedicated, for they were aware that they would assume responsible posts when they graduated. All attended school on scholarships provided either by the PAHO, ICA, their governments, or private foundations. Their average age was twenty-nine years. Some are going directly into positions in the public health departments of their countries or into hospitals. Those who are, at present, uncommitted will undoubtedly be sought after, since there is such a scarcity of qualified nutritionists throughout Latin America.

### *Problems Encountered*

It is easy for persons working in the United States to forget that very close by, there are countries in which many things taken for granted in the States are not even thought of in Latin America. One of the big problems in starting a school of nutrition such as the one we have been describing is the lack of textbooks. It is hard to imagine teaching a course in food preparation, for example, without a text, but that is exactly what must be done at present. As for giving the students references to read in a library, this necessarily is limited since they do not have a sufficiently wide command of English; and, although INCAP has one of the finest libraries in Central America for scientific reference on biochemical and nutritional topics, very little is available in Spanish on nutrition and food preparation.

Why not translate textbooks? While much material could be translated directly, other information would have to be rewritten, due to the great differences in the customs and the cultures of the various populations with whom the graduates will work. For

instance, North Americans think in terms of three meals a day, but some other cultures prefer four or more meals a day; still others have only two meals each day. North Americans speak in terms of bacon and eggs for breakfast, but others think only of coffee with milk and sweet bread. In Mexico and Middle America, great sectors of the population don't eat bread at all; for them *tortillas* form the "staff of life."

Other matters also must be considered. The electric range is standard equipment in the United States; but in Central America, many hospital kitchens use wood-burning stoves. Obviously, directions for cooking must be modified when there are such radical differences in basic equipment. These are only a few illustrations to point up the problems attendant to the translation of texts into another language for use in another culture.

While these problems can be solved relatively easily, the differences among the students and their consequent problems go deeper, for they come from varying backgrounds of which the foregoing are only indications. Due to differences in cultural background, many problems which would be considered from one point of view in the United States must be approached from a different angle in Latin America. Mutual understanding must, therefore, be achieved to make the training effective. While understanding is not easy to attain, with patience and good will it can be achieved.

In Latin American countries, as in the United States, a professional degree is essential to recognition and acceptance in a profession. There is far less standardization in education; however, in Latin America than in the United States, and it is, therefore, more difficult to evaluate educational background. For this reason, the curriculum of the School of Nutrition and Dietetics has been worked out to reduce some of the inequities in educational background. Graduates of the School will have had a sound preparation, measured against recognized standards for education in the field of nutrition and dietetics.

At the end of December 1961, the first group of Latin American nutritionists graduating from INCAP's School of Nutrition and Dietetics returned to their respective countries, carrying with them a knowledge of their profession and a determination to use that knowledge conscientiously and constructively. The class of 1961 has already had half of its first academic year and is pushing toward the same goal of service.