

THE SIXTH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF LEPROLOGY

MADRID, OCTOBER 3rd-11th, 1953

The Sixth International Congress of Leprology (this name was adopted by the local organising committee) was held in Madrid from October 3rd-11th, 1953. The arrangements for the Congress had been undertaken by a local organising committee, the General Secretary of which was Dr. Felix Contreras. The General Secretary of the International Leprosy Association, Dr. Ernest Muir, had visited Madrid twice, and in between visits had done much to help in the organisation of the Congress. During the congress the committee's responsibility was shared by the Officers, Executive Committee and General Council.

Three hundred and thirty-seven persons registered as members of the Congress, and there were also many "adherents". Fifty-one countries were represented, Spain by 117, Brazil by 33, the United States by 25, France and territories by 25, Argentina by 19, Germany by 14, Britain and overseas territories 21, and other countries by smaller numbers. No communist country was represented.

One great practical difficulty was encountered in dealing with the very large number of papers submitted, totalling 227. It had been announced that no worker could submit more than two papers (and only a few exceeded their ration). Interpretation arrangements were available in only one room; multiple simultaneous sessions were not possible. It was therefore decided that no one worker would read more than one paper. The sessions were increased to eight, but even so the time allowed for presentation of each paper was often inadequate. Translators experienced much difficulty because many speakers spoke too fast; it was therefore often difficult to understand the papers presented; such difficulties are not uncommon in such international gatherings. They are mitigated by the fact that all papers read are, or should be, available in abstract before they are read.

The attendance at some of the sessions of the Congress was poor. There were several reasons for this: much work of the Congress had to go on during sessions, for example, office and administrative work, and sometimes technical committees; our Spanish hosts had arranged officially and unofficially many social events of a most attractive nature, and some overlapping of these with the working sessions was unavoidable: the difficulties mentioned above reduced the interest of some sessions.

The technical committees appointed numbered five, and the meetings of these committees provided much valuable sharing of ideas and experience. The proceedings of the Congress included the following as the main items of work:— a preliminary meeting of the General Council to approve the arrangements, eight sessions of the Congress for the reading and discussion of papers, a varying number of meetings of the five sub-committees, a final meeting of the Congress Council, the final plenary session of the Congress, and a formal closing session.

At the final plenary session, the reports of the five sub-committees were presented, discussed, and voted on. The reports of the committees on Therapy, Immunology and Social Aspects were adopted with little or no discussion. The report of the committee on Epidemiology and Control had, in the opinion of the General Council, laid more emphasis on B.C.G. vaccination in control than was justified by evidence, and the General Council had, under the rules of procedure of the Congress, suggested that the Report be modified in this respect. The proposal however was not approved by the Plenary Session, and the report was adopted as presented.

The Congress left one with mixed feelings. The social side was magnificent, and was greatly enjoyed by those who were free because not engaged in congress business. The opportunity of meeting workers from so many countries and sharing views and experience was greatly welcomed by all. The more serious aspects of the Congress were less satisfactory. The difficulty of the large numbers of papers and their proper presentation and discussion was insuperable. The work of the sub-committees was done under great difficulties, at odd times and all hours, and often the report was drafted against pressure of time. Free discussion of the reports at the final plenary session had to be curtailed. These conditions are not conducive to good work.

The present writer has long held the view that International Leprosy Congresses should be run on lines quite different from in the past, and has made suggestions on the matter. Experience at Madrid has strengthened his view, that this is not the best kind of congress, and that the whole matter should be thoroughly explored long before the next Congress.

J.L.