

# Editorial

## CONGRESSES

This issue of *Leprosy Review* contains reports of a number of congresses, conferences and seminars—in chronological order, Rio de Janeiro, Dakar, Dar-es-Salaam, Delhi, Lusaka, Kathmandu. Leprosy workers, it would seem to some, are being exposed to the prevailing fashions and the accompanying occupational hazards that are now unthinkingly accepted, perhaps even welcomed, by fellow-scientists in other spheres. But if the dangers and risks are real, and are frankly recognized for what they are, these gatherings do serve a most useful purpose. It has become trite to remark on the erstwhile “segregation” of those devoted men and women who in bygone days toiled in remote geographical backwaters to bring what help they could to leprosy sufferers relegated by a frightened and prejudiced society. Cut off from the centres of learning and research, and denied fruitful contact with their peers, our medical forebears cannot perhaps be blamed overmuch for developing idiosyncrasies of vocabulary and pathology and nomenclature—their references to “raised macules” caused the hackles of the dermatologist to rise, and their use (or abuse) of the word “reaction” provoked painful and puzzled smiles from other clinicians.

Now, leprosy workers are conferring with their fellows, and peers. They are trying to speak the same language, and conform to accepted norms of usage. They have welcomed the irruption of scientific fellow-travellers bringing rich experiences in related fields of microbiological and immunological research into the fascinating problems of leprosy, as yet unsolved. Well over a third of the 552 participants at last year's International Leprosy Congress had “come into leprosy from the outside”, as the British Minister of Health remarked in his inaugural speech, and many of the most recent advances in leprosy research have been made by workers who are bringing to bear on our

special problems the accumulated expertise and the sophisticated investigational procedures that are proving their value in related fields.

The sharing of this new knowledge, and its application to the problems of leprosy as seen in the field and in the various governmental public health planning offices, are of urgent and fundamental importance. And this collaboration of scientists and field-workers, of people with varied backgrounds and experience, is all to the good.

Leprosy as a widespread infection cannot be tackled as an isolated entity, expensively reduplicating a health service responsible for other endemic diseases. Nor can the leprosy infection in the individual patient be taken out of its immunological framework, or from its *human* setting—with its psychological and social components—and its relation to other diseases. Hence, the increasing insistence on comprehensive medical care; and hence, the value of the inter-disciplinary approach to the outstanding problems still confronting the epidemiologist and the microbiologist alike.

In the microbiological field, *Mycobacterium leprae* may have unusual, even unique, properties, but the more it is studied in relation to other mycobacteria—with the numerous experimental and laboratory techniques now available—the sooner will the problem of *in vitro* culture of this most interesting host-dependent intracellular facultative parasite be solved.

A brief meeting may generate more heat than light, or it may serve as a most useful catalysing encounter whose influence may be made to persist by a conscious effort to maintain the contacts and to exchange information and “hunches” and “leads”. On the practical level, concerted and co-ordinated plans for regional anti-leprosy campaigns may be worked out, and public opinion as well as government interest may be aroused and mobilized for the sustained action needed if pious words are to be translated into noble deeds.