

SUMMARY OF THE WORK OF THE BRAZILIAN
FEDERATION OF SOCIETIES FOR
ASSISTANCE TO LEPERS*

by

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Both in my own country and in other lands, it has often been my privilege to talk to large and friendly audiences about the problems of leprosy and of social work for the victims.

Let me say here, however, that the audience this evening fills me with unusual emotion, being composed as it is of distinguished specialists and notable representatives of various countries and of private organizations—veterans of the long war that is still being waged against the terrible disease.

Timidity, however, is lessened by the certainty of being understood, and by the welcome that great leprologists have always given to lay-cooperation, to lay-workers who, without pretensions, seek only to give their limited but enthusiastic help. And we try to collaborate only in accord with the program laid out by scientists. Otherwise, we would be building on the sand, and our work might be social, but it would not be prophylactic.

We have always stressed with our Societies the necessity to carry out the plans as outlined by technicians. Therefore, we always have a technical board, consisting of capable scientists, and our affiliated Societies do the same.

One satisfying proof that great scientists appreciate the help of laymen is apparent this evening from the fact that the delegation of the United States of America has as its Chairman a layman—Mr. Perry Burgess.

He needs no special introduction or words of praise; since, besides having rendered incalculable service to leprosy patients all over the world, he is known also as the author of the extraordinary romance "Who Walk Alone," celebrated as a "best-seller," translated into various languages, and known in Portuguese as "*Eles Caminham Sós.*"

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Speaking of private cooperation, and of our appreciation of great scientists, let me here, in the name of thousands of my co-workers all over Brazil, reverently salute and welcome the distinguished Professor Ernest Muir who honors us with his presence—the serene wise man whose modesty and simple manner never reveal to the public the great worth of the man himself.

Until 1935, private help for leprosy patients in Brazil was given by isolated organizations or through the Federation, the Societies having no definite program, and some of them helping only patients in institutions. Although some help was rendered, it was insignificant, since there was no definite plan to help also the families of the sick. There had been formed in the national conscience no exact knowledge of the problem; and, without such a comprehension, social endeavor does not obtain the endorsement and the elements necessary for success.

In accordance with the recommendations of the Health Organization of the League of Nations, and later, of the International Congress on Leprosy, at Cairo, the various governments were to give both material aid and medical care to leprosy patients.

Therefore, in 1935, the Federation of Societies in Brazil, wisely guided by the late Dr. Eduardo Rabello, organized a comprehensive plan of prevention, including the care of healthy children of leprosy parents, and the more efficient provision of assistance for needy families of the sick.

In such a large country where transportation is difficult, where the Government was supposed to do everything without any assistance from private agencies, there were many problems to be solved and many regional difficulties to be overcome.

The Federation carried on successfully great educational and financial campaigns. Raising in various states large sums of money for the construction of prevention-homes, it also aroused everywhere a desire to extirpate the terrible disease.

Among our ladies, strong Societies were organized—ladies who were now beginning to be interested in social work. These Societies cooperated with the Public Health Service, arranging for the internment of patients who were now no longer afraid that later their families would be abandoned.

During four years the Federation carried on its work, depending upon the generosity of the public. It carried on campaigns, reorganized and founded Societies, and began the construction of preventoria.

In the decade, 1935-1945, 144 Societies were founded. More than a million dollars were raised in eighteen financial campaigns.

In the Societies, 7000 ladies worked voluntarily on the general boards, and 3000 on the technical and deliberative commissions.

In 1939, the President of the Republic spontaneously offered to the Federation federal aid for the construction and equipment of prevention-homes. On this occasion, and many times later, President Vargas re-affirmed what he had said at the Second National Congress on Social Help for the Lepers: "This material aid was not solicited by the Federation (S.A.L.), but was voluntarily offered by the Government, after three years of observing how this philanthropic organization works and makes appropriate use of the funds received." During his various trips over Brazil the President visited many of the prevention-homes in construction or in operation.

Therefore, since 1939 a fund has been included in the annual budget of the nation to help in building and equipping preventoria.

It is easy to imagine the difficulties in carrying out this large program efficiently, since ours is the only private organization of a federated type in all the country. And in its special work, it had no precedents to follow, since conditions here differ from those in other countries.

Without statistics, without experience as to the capacity and maintenance of the prevention-homes, and without personnel trained for the work, almost everything had to be improvised.

Today, with eleven years of experience, we can work more efficiently. There has been formed everywhere a "national conscience" as to the disease; and this is one of the best results of the work of the Federation. There is a certainty that the problem is not to be hidden nor ignored. The leprosy patient must be interned, and adequate provision must be made for his family.

It has often been argued that the healthy children of leprous parents should not be placed in institutions, but in homes of relatives or foster-homes.

Let us see the opinion of Dr. Nelson de Souza Campos, one of our greatest authorities:

"The prevention-home is more than a mere institution of social help for helpless children, deprived of their parents: it is, above all, a means of *prevention* of the disease. The separating of the child from the place of infection, the medical attention, the higher level of living—these things save the child from leprosy . . .

"To bring up, to educate, to save from disease, to transform the exposed child into a useful citizen—this is the work of the prevention-home.

"Could there be a mission more sublime?"

Dr. Bonifacio Costa, a distinguished hygienist, thus refers to the children of sick people:

"The environment of the paternal home may be made dangerous because of the existence of transmissible diseases (tuberculosis, leprosy and others); by immoral conditions (alcoholism, prostitution); by moral and physical incapacity of the progenitors (by sickness, accident, old-age) economically unable to maintain the home in such comfort as to guarantee the education of the children.

"Now, if speaking of the home itself and the parents, we find that, for reasons mentioned above, the parents are in no condition to offer the guaranteed opportunity of education, what shall we say in our Americas of the adoptive homes where the problem—education, hygiene, and comfort—leaves so much to be desired, especially in the poorest homes?

"What is the use, then, merely to remove the child from a contaminating place and put it in another where everything is lacking?"

These arguments, especially as applied to Latin American countries, are all the more powerful, since leprosy finds the greatest number of victims among the less-favored classes where misery walks hand in hand with ignorance.

Recently we visited in two countries of this continent some of these so-called "adoptive homes," and we found the same situation that we would have here if we were trying that plan. Little children, at seven o'clock at night, without bath or dinner, ragged, dirty, and with no medical supervision! The woman who was supposed to be in charge of one of these homes, and was considered as very kind to the children, was not at home. The six children, between the ages of two and twelve, were left entirely alone. This woman, as well as those in charge of the other homes we visited, receives for the care of each of the children more for board than is spent for the support of each child in the comfortable prevention-homes of Brazil.

The surroundings of these substitute-homes, and also of the neighborhood, were most unpleasant, incapable of stimulating an ideal for the children or raising their standard of living.

In almost all the countries, with rare exceptions, we found this same picture. Besides, it was almost impossible, of course, to give systematic medical attention which is so important, not to mention the balanced diet, super-alimentation, special physical exercises,

and all the things that are so necessary to protect the child from the terrible disease.

On the contrary, our prevention-homes, almost all of them new, have overcome serious difficulties as to buildings, equipment, management, and educational and technical direction (along with the great financial strain that exists in the poorer countries), and have rendered invaluable service to the nation.

We who try to direct the work, who work directly with the problems, are the first to see the defects and we understand them better than do those who merely stand aside and point them out. The majority of those who labor for this ideal of saving the children and making them happy desire to correct mistakes, to perfect the organization, and to realize the dream of making of each preventorium a real "home."

The obstacles are tremendous, especially so in a country like ours where for many years (and until the present day, in many places), to help unfortunate children has meant only to furnish for them a roof, bread, and some instruction, without consideration of any natural tendencies of the personality for a special vocation. Many people seem to think that this is the limit of the "rights" of the child, born under such conditions of unhappiness, and that the right to choose a profession is an "unnecessary luxury for poor people."

There are also those who oppose recreation in its most wholesome forms. From the age of five years upward, there is separation of the sexes, even in the case of brother and sister. There are those who oppose diversions and prohibit excursions. The good things that are permitted for our own children are prohibited for those unfortunate little ones who lose their homes. In other words, these people understand and endorse only the old-fashioned "asylum" where the child receives everything as "charity," has all duties, and no privileges whatever.

See what was said by Dr. Howard Hopkirk, Executive Director of the "Child-Welfare League of America," with his experience of more than twenty years:

"Institutions for dependent children should take care of children of both sexes. Thus brothers and sisters could live, play, and study together, and all enjoy the privileges of normal life, including plays and sports for both boys and girls.

"When such institutions are well-directed, they offer great advantages for the interned.

"As for the affection that is said to be found only in the "adop-

tive homes," we have observed that in the institutions, it may be supplied by the love of those who labor in them or direct them, or by the other children which are drawn together by sincere devotion one to another.

"Modern institutions which really take interest in the welfare of the interned do not oblige the children to enter as uniformed groups into various parades; and, only in groups, to take part in civic or religious celebrations, or in visits and diversions, but permit or arrange for little groups of children or youths, as congenial friends, to take part, without uniform in these celebrations."

We are glad to say that some of our institutions have these good customs, and have obtained the best results.

Wherever there is continuous and satisfactory medical control of the interned, the ladies who direct the institutions invite the adolescents without fear into their own homes, thus giving to them the necessary confidence and taking away the fear that later they may contract leprosy.

Hundreds of these children, attending secondary and technical schools, thanks to the parental interest of the Directors of the Societies, take part annually in patriotic parades. This shows the value of the prevention-home which is saving the child from the horror and stigma of the disease.

When possible, we try to satisfy, as to vocation, the natural preference of the interned. Thus we have some in the government service: nurses, dressmakers, secretaries, hair-dressers, and manicurists, for we hold that any honest labor is honorable. Most of the interned prefer agriculture. This pleases us, since life in the open air gives more hope for good health. Many, however, have entered the Army, the Navy, the Air Forces, technical schools, the telegraph-office, or the post-office.

Several of the young women of the prevention-homes have married young men of healthy families, easily entering into social classes, and suffering no exclusion because of having lived in such an institution. These couples now have many children, all normal and healthy.

In various ways the Societies help the interned patients. Besides the many personal gifts, such as clothing, trousseau, and furniture for those about to marry, radios, agricultural implements, and sewing-machines, they supply also records for victrolas, books, and magazines.

The Societies help in many other ways. They build churches,

diversion-pavilions, cinemas, libraries, and athletic fields; and they furnish schools, school materials, and work-shops.

Very often, also, the Directors of a Society have to help the patients in taking care of legal matters and pensions and other stipends.

All this is cited by way of contrast with what existed eleven years ago when there were only two preventoria in all Brazil.

Of course much yet remains to be done; but if we look back at the ground that has been covered, we see some good results. As a proof of this, we had the work presented at the Second National Congress on Social Help for the Lepers in July 1945. The topics discussed and the conclusions reached show greater security for the leprosy victims and also greater knowledge and experience applied to their problems. Better, however, than any general explanations, the following figures will give an idea of what has been obtained:

AFFILIATED SOCIETIES

	1935	1945
Existing Societies	8	150
Persons directly interested in the work— trustees, committees, and counselors	456	10,250
Families helped	0	6,630

HELP FOR THE HEALTHY CHILDREN OF LEPROSY PATIENTS

Prevention-homes	1	26
Children interned	460	2,760

The Federation (S.A.L.) is today certainly the largest organization for social work existing in the whole of Brazil. It is dependent upon the approval and interest of the public authorities, and also of all private social groups or classes.