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EDITORIALS

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INTERNATIONAL LEPROSY CONGRESSES

The International Leprosy Congresses have undoubtedly performed excellent services as regards the advancement of the knowledge of this disease as well as the creation of a spirit of good will and cooperation among workers in this field of medicine. Leprosy meetings of less general character, as for example the Pan-American and All-India conferences, have also contributed greatly to the same purposes. Leprosy, being one of the great public health problems confronting humanity, as well as one of the great riddles of medicine, deserves much attention and continuous study. The welfare of leprosy patients has always engaged the attention of many devoted and untiring social workers, among whom those belonging to religious organizations, to women's associations, and others, have performed humanitarian and social services well "beyond the line of duty."

Leprosy congresses last only a few days, however, and much of the benefit brought about by them is soon forgotten or diluted among the many tasks of the daily medical and social routine of life. When a new meeting is called, most of us hurriedly gather together the facts and observations of the past few years to present them, since each one of us thinks it is a duty to contribute something, however little, to progress as regards the therapy, pathology, bacteriology, or some other

aspect of leprosy. The result is an excessive number of contributions, and a tiring repetition of the same subjects with the same conclusions, by leprologists from most varied parts of the world. The long and repetitious programs become nightmares, and the audience gets slimmer as the days go by. Physical and mental exhaustion, somewhat aggravated by the many items in the social programs, contribute to make the last two or three sessions too hurried and the subjects treated hardly listened to.

At the last leprosy congress, held in Havana in 1948, the closing plenary session, perhaps the most important one of all, saw many empty seats, many ruffled tempers, and many jaded minds that had no more to say. The most typical example of the results of this state of mind is the fate of the report of the Committee on Classification, one of the most hard-working committees of the congress. One single and hurried reading of this report was followed by a short discussion, after which more than half of the report—a very important part of it—was flatly rejected without any fundamental objections. The same applies to other subjects dealt with, including the selection of the place and time of the next congress. The whole procedure did not appeal to this writer as worthy of the importance of the occasion or as doing justice to the men who worked hard to produce a system of classification that deserved at least to be read and thoughtfully considered by all. It did not seem to be a conscientious, democratic, serious and solid manner of solving important problems.

What should be done to avoid repetition of the same evils in the future, and to extend the benefits of these periodical meetings and make them permanent and progressive? I am sure that many of the men who took part in the Havana Congress have thought about this and wish to find an effective remedy.

I would suggest that a permanent international committee be appointed to consider the matter of acceptable contributions, to pool those on the same subject by different authors, and to write the program of the next Congress well in advance; that this committee serve as a consulting body to those intending to present papers or other contributions; and that the decisions of this committee be accepted by all. I would also suggest that the reports of the congress committees and the resolutions carried at the final sessions, should be voted on "*en principio*," as it is expressed in Spanish; that is, in their fundamental aspects. The details would be left to a "Resolutions Committee" which would deal critically with the reports of the technical committees before they are presented to the final plenary session, as at the

Cairo Congress; or it might work them out later, consulting if necessary the dermatologic and leprologic associations and organizations of the world, before reaching final decisions.

Other permanent committees could be appointed for other tasks, that would extend the benefits of the actions taken and conclusions reached, through the intervening years between congresses. All of these committees could be made subsidiaries of the International Leprosy Association, the primary organizer of these international meetings. Difficulties due to distance and financial burdens might hamper the work of these men; but I am sure that, in some way, contributions could be found to cover the expenses of handling correspondence and air-mail charges.

In conclusion I wish to say that the above remarks carry no criticism of anyone in particular, nor of the organizers of the Havana Congress, but are prompted by observations on the usual congressional activities as carried out today, whether men meet to consider leprosy or any other subject. These ideas have been in my intimate thoughts for many years, and if by putting them down on paper any good is done, and the work of future gatherings is eased, I shall be highly gratified.