

THE NAME "LEPROSY"; REFORMIST TERMINOLOGY

For some years increasingly active efforts have been directed to bringing the general public to a more reasonable attitude toward leprosy and its victims than it has had in the past, a wholly laudable objective with which everyone concerned is sympathetic. One phase of that effort, which has not met with so much approbation among leprosy workers, has been to change the names that have been used in connection with that disease.

At first the attack was directed mainly toward the word "leper," with much effect. More recently the target has been broadened. The objective now is to abolish the name of the disease itself, "leprosy," and with that to introduce a complete new terminology. What these terms would be is indicated in two news items which appear in this issue.

Since the time of the Havana congress THE JOURNAL has adhered to its recommendations in this matter. The word "leper" has not been used except where unavoidable, e.g., in official names and direct quotations. The word "leprosy" is used freely and without apology, in agreement with the Havana decision that it "should be retained as the scientific designation of the disease."

Recently there has appeared an article entitled "The Name 'Leprosy'," by Dr. Frederick C. Lendrum (see abstract in this issue), and the editor of *The Star*, a propaganda magazine published by a group of the patients at the U. S. Federal Leprosarium at Carville, Louisiana, requested that we reprint it. That request was submitted to our Associate Editors in a letter pointing out that nothing of that kind had as yet appeared in our pages; that to the Editor personally the word in question does not seem objectionable, or any more "unscientific" than "malaria" and other well-established medical names; but that the article in question seemed to be a unique study of its sort, and that if a majority of the Associate Editors should be in favor of reprinting it that would be done.

All replied that they were not in agreement with the proposal to abolish the word in question. Three were not in favor of reprinting the article, one of them suggesting that if any such article were to be reprinted a certain other one would be preferable. The fourth felt that the article should be reprinted, but for the purpose of stimulating a general discussion of the matter.

One of the group submitted, together with his letter of

opinion, a statement for publication in this department. That appears below, together with the essential parts of the communications received from the other members of the group.—
EDITOR.

6 *From Dr. R. Chaussinand, Paris:*

Depuis quelques années, une campagne très active est menée dans les pays de langue anglaise et principalement aux Etats-Unis, contre l'usage du mot "lépreux". Les promoteurs de ce mouvement estiment que l'horreur qui poursuit le malade atteint de lèpre est due à l'emploi du mot "lépreux", stigmatisé dans la Bible, et exigent que ce terme honni soit remplacé par la définition "malade atteint de lèpre". Certains demandent même que la mot "lèpre" soit rayé de la terminologie médicale et proposent l'adoption des expressions peu heureuses de "maladie de Hansen" et d' "Hansénosis".

Cette campagne n'a soulevé aucun intérêt dans les territoires de l'Union française et n'a pratiquement pas trouvé d'appui dans les pays latins.

Il nous paraît inconcevable que l'on puisse croire qu'en changeant le nom d'une maladie, on diminuera l'horreur qui s'y attache. Au bout de peu de temps, le monde entier saurait que les expressions "maladie de Hansen", "Hansénosis" et "lèpre" ont exactement la même signification et cette substitution de noms aurait un effet absolument contraire à celui que l'on désire. Ce serait le moyen le plus sûr de persuader le public que la lèpre constitue réellement le fléau le plus terrible de l'humanité puisqu'on cherche à dissimuler son véritable nom.

A notre avis, il ne peut être raisonnablement question d'adopter une nouvelle appellation pour définir la lèpre et nous estimons que le terme "lépreux" ne peut pas être considéré sérieusement comme plus haïssable que l'expression "malade atteint de lèpre".

D'ailleurs, si quelques centaines de malades, peut-être, s'inquiètent d'être dénommés "lépreux", des millions d'individus atteints de lèpre, répartis dans le monde, ignorent le sens du mot "lépreux" puisqu'ils sont désignés dans leurs différents idiomes et dialectes par les expressions extrêmement variées, nullement dérivées du mot grec "lepra".

Il serait heureux que les promoteurs du mouvement, exigeant la suppression des mots "lèpre" et "lépreux", se rendent compte que leur campagne contribue plutôt à affoler le public et à démoraliser les malades instruits, qui, s'ils sont humainement traités, ne demandent qu'une chose, c'est que la presse observe le silence à leur sujet. Les lépreux ont, en effet, compris que toute cette agitation stérile et les publications de soi-disant vulgarisation sont responsables, bien plus que la Bible, de la crainte que le public manifeste actuellement à leur égard.

Dès que la lèpre sera considérée partout comme une infection ordinaire ne nécessitant nullement une législation d'exception, l'horreur séculaire cessera de poursuivre le lépreux. La lèpre est une maladie moins contagieuse et moins dangereuse que la tuberculose. Il n'y a donc aucune raison valable de se montrer plus dur envers les lépreux qu'envers les tuberculeux. Quand le public saura que les lépreux peuvent, sans danger, être traités librement dans des dispensaires, il comprendra que la lèpre est une maladie moins grave que beaucoup d'autres infections et il ne

considérera plus les lépreux comme des parias. Nous avons eu l'occasion de constater à Saïgon qu'un tel revirement de l'opinion publique pouvait être obtenu rapidement.

Ce ne sont pas les mots "lèpre" et "lépreux" qui doivent être changés, mais les législations antilépreuses absurdes du XX^e siècle, souvent aussi inhumaines que celles du Moyen âge.

From Dr. R. G. Cochrane, London:

With reference to Dr. Lendrum's article, I have never found the word "leprosy" undesirable, and I have often pointed out that when the general scientific world dropped the word "consumptive" they still retained the word "tuberculosis." Leprosy has become, in medical parlance, a disease with definite clinic signs and symptoms, and the description of leprosy today applies to a definite clinical condition, and to my mind it would be very unreasonable to try to replace it with another term. I am in complete agreement with the Cuba conference that the word "leper" should be dropped entirely. That word is a social stigma; "leprosy" is a very interesting disease.

I think that Dr. Lendrum's article should be reprinted, but that at the same time there should be printed comments designed to stimulate a general discussion of the matter in the Correspondence section. We would probably get some interesting views.

From Dr. E. Muir, London:

Thank you for your letter of 18th February enclosing a copy of Dr. Lendrum's "The Name 'Leprosy'." I have no doubt that his facts regarding that word are all quite correct, but I feel that it would be a pity to discontinue the use of "leprosy" as the name of the disease to which it refers. It is not the name that needs to be changed, but the attitude of people towards those suffering from the disease. Even supposing the name Hansen's disease or something of that sort were substituted, that name would also very soon come to be just as harmful as the word "leprosy."

There is one glaring misstatement in Dr. Lendrum's paper. That is where he says, "For five million of the sons of men with this ailment..." The word "leprosy" has significance for only a very small fraction of the five million people who suffer from leprosy. In India it has practically no significance at all, and for very few in Africa. I should think the same thing would apply to China and probably, to a large extent, in places like Brazil. In most of these places quite different words are used, and so "leprosy" does not have any effect, good or bad, for them.

If an article on this subject should be reprinted in the JOURNAL, I would suggest that the one appearing in the current number of *Leprosy Review*, by Sir William MacArthur, would be more suitable. It is a purely objective, scientific article by a well acknowledged medical historian, and is of great interest although he has no propaganda object in view.

From Dr. V. Pardo-Castello, Havana:

I agree that there is no more reason to change the name of the disease called "lepra" or "leprosy" than there is to change that of "malaria" or "syphilis" or "pellagra." These are names well known in all parts of the world, and they designate specific disease entities. Furthermore, even if

we should change officially the name of these diseases, the medical profession and the people would continue calling them by their old names. Some time ago an attempt was made by some groups of moralists to change "syphilis" to "lues" or "avariosis," but "syphilis" remains to this day. Therefore, it is my opinion that the attempt to call "leprosy" by the name of "Hansen's disease" will not fare any better except among those who propose the change.

Apart from that, I am against the use of eponyms. If it is true that Hansen was the man that contributed most to the knowledge of leprosy in the 19th century, I doubt that he would have approved of having the disease called after him. Hansen's bacillus is the name given the germ that apparently causes leprosy, and that is proper and fitting since it was Hansen who first demonstrated this bacillus and considered it the etiologic agent of leprosy.

I am against reprinting the article by Dr. Lendrum in the JOURNAL. It seems to be a scholarly contribution, but since I am not conversant with most of the biblical quotations or with the ancient languages I am not qualified to judge it from that point of view. From the medical and from the common man's points of view, I think the contribution by Dr. Lendrum is just interesting, and entertaining.

From Dr. Harry L. Arnold, Hawaii:

In connection with the present agitation to change completely the terminology used in connection with leprosy, I would like to quote what I wrote in an editorial which appeared in the *Hawaii Medical Journal* in 1949 (May-June issue). It was pointed out there that two "hasty and ill-advised" pieces of legislation had recently been passed by the Territorial legislature, and concerning one of them it was said:

The first of these revises our laws relating to leprosy by substituting the phrases "Hansen's Disease," "Hansen's Disease sufferer," and so on for leprosy and leprous patient. Happily, this change need not go beyond the phraseology of the law itself; but the implication that leprosy is so dreadful that its name should not even be printed is an unfortunate one and could be harmful. Progress in creating a sane public attitude toward tuberculosis was made by educating the public to accept it under its own proper name as just another contagious disease. It is doubtful whether the same progress could have been made had we insisted on calling it "Koch's Disease" or the like. And calling leprosy "Hansen's Disease" will merely puzzle those who don't know what it means, without bringing any particular comfort to those who do. "A rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet."

The argument for abolishing the word leprosy would logically extend to include three major diseases which were unspeakable as recently as a decade or two ago: tuberculosis, syphilis and cancer. These are all household words and tea-table topics today, as a result of free and easy use of them in magazines, newspapers and radio broadcasts. It is doubtful indeed if the public's attitude toward any one of these diseases could have been brought to anything like the present state of enlightenment if we had pussyfooted around calling them "Koch's disease," "Schaudinn's disease" and "Virchow's disease." In fact, during the pussy-footing era very little progress, if any, was made.