

CORRESPONDENCE

This department is provided for the publication of informal communications which are of interest because they are informative or stimulating, and for the discussion of controversial matters.

THE OPERATION OF INTERNATIONAL CONGRESSES

TO THE EDITOR:

I question if anyone is more conscious of the defects of the Madrid Congress than I am, the more so as I had so much to do with its preparation. I was in touch with the local authorities for more than two years before the time of the Congress, and visited Madrid on three or four occasions so as to maintain close liaison.

The chief difficulties were: First, the language, and the manner of reading. The majority of the papers were in Spanish, and a large number of them were read so rapidly that the interpreters had to give up trying to translate them, and they were missed entirely by those unacquainted with Spanish. The second difficulty was the inexperience of the local committee in running a congress of that nature. This is bound to be a difficulty wherever such a Congress is held if it is left to a local committee. Then, too, the scientific work was crowded out to a certain extent by the very excellent social engagements and entertainments; also the dermatological conference held in the middle of the Congress further crowded out the time.

The greatest difficulty was the attempt to arrange all the papers at the last minute. One month after the Congress I attended a leprosy conference in India. There all the program had been arranged, printed and distributed well in advance. Suitable individuals had been asked to write papers on the various subjects to be discussed. There was plenty of time for discussion.

For the next Congress I would suggest tentatively something like 8 sessions, each of 2 hours, with an average of 4 papers to be read at each session; that is, 32 papers in all. Considerable time and thought should be given to choosing the subjects and the writers of the papers, and these should be invited by the I.L.A. Council in conjunction with a small local committee. If this were done, much of the work done in the meetings of the technical committees could be accomplished at full sessions of the Congress, only the drafting of the reports being left to the committees. Timing should be so arranged that delegates could have a printed copy of abstracts of the papers to be presented in their hands a month before the Congress. I think it would be well to limit the number of delegates from the country where the Congress is held; others might attend, but not to take part.

—E. MUIR

TO THE EDITOR:

In response to your request for an expression of opinion about the Madrid Congress and plans for the next one, I would say that my views on international congresses in general and leprosy congresses in particular were expressed in a communication which appeared in *THE JOURNAL* 17 (1949) 118-119.

There I said that, in my opinion, international leprosy gatherings attempt to do the impossible, to within a few days reconcile the irreconcilable, and to do work which would probably take years to accomplish—all of this being attempted by a large and heterogeneous gathering of people, very varied in experience. I suggested that the usefulness of the general type of international congress, compared with what could be accomplished by a small group of experts, is very limited indeed; that perhaps it should be just a meeting place for different workers, for the reading of selected papers and for discussions, with the program fixed long before the meeting convenes. Certain sessions should be devoted to certain subjects, and the readers of the papers, as well as the openers of the discussions, should be carefully selected.

I think the Madrid Congress very strongly confirmed those views, and I have very little to add. For the next Congress I would like to see my proposals fully considered. Give the host country (India) a definite number of hours, and let them arrange the program for these hours. The rest of the time to be arranged by the I.L.A., by a special committee appointed for the job. Subjects and chief speakers to be fixed long in advance. Details could be completed nearer the actual meeting.

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JOHN LOWE
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TO THE EDITOR:

The purpose of this letter is to offer certain constructive suggestions, the fruit of observations at the recent Congress, with nothing of the spirit of criticism. The excessive number of members and of papers, together with the prominence given the social side of the congress, made it so that much too few papers were read, the majority of them not even being brought to the knowledge of the delegates. These undesirable features should be avoided in the next meeting for the benefit of the campaign which we are now waging.

1. Perhaps the reduction of the number of the themes to be dealt with should be the first question to be considered. I do not know if this would be possible, but if we should limit the program to two or three subjects, those which are the most important and timely, the number of papers would be reduced.

2. There should be a firm determination, strictly adhered to, that the papers should be in the hands of the organizing committee at least 90

days before the Congress, so as to give time for their selection in accordance with the themes to be discussed, and for mimeographing them for distribution during the meeting.

3. Previous determination that only one paper may be presented by an author in each theme, he to be given a minimum of 10 minutes and a maximum of 15 minutes for reading and 5 minutes for discussion.

4. Limit the social side of the meeting, arranging it in such a way that it will not interfere with the scientific program, which naturally should have a preponderance of the time of the Congress. I believe that an international congress is a gathering of specialists who bring the fruit of years of work and study, whose opinions and conclusions should be duly evaluated so that the final conclusions of the Congress may reflect the median of opinions.

5. The Committees, which should be previously selected from among those who are considered authorities in the field of leprosy, should have knowledge of all the papers presented on the theme with which they are to deal, which would be possible either by hearing the communications or by reading them at the time of the sessions.

These suggestions are offered in a constructive spirit. There is nothing in them of the criticism that I heard in Madrid.

Goiânia, Brazil

NELSON SOUSA CAMPOS

TO THE EDITOR:

Viewed in retrospect, the Sixth International Congress of Leprology (*sic*) was, on the whole, as successful professionally as could have been expected, and was even more successful socially. I feel sure our gracious, hospitable and hard-working quondam hosts, and the officers of the I.L.A., who as I understand it collaborated on the arrangement of the program, will not take it amiss if I proffer a few items of what I hope are constructive criticism.

The successful arrangement of an orderly program was accomplished in spite of the system used, at the cost of an inordinate amount of night-and-day work by a very few extraordinarily capable people. Even they were unable to make the entire program available to the delegates at the outset of the meeting, to permit advance planning of the week's activities. Had less competent or less industrious persons been in charge, the meeting could quite easily have been reduced to utter chaos. For the Seventh Congress, I suggest that:

1. A rigid deadline for submission of titles and abstracts should be established, this to be at least four months in advance of the meeting.

2. A program committee in the host country should be established to arrange the papers submitted in an orderly program which can be printed and circulated to the I.L.A. membership and other interested persons, at least six or eight weeks in advance of the meeting. This program should give the titles of the papers, authors' names, institutions, and abstracts,

and above all should be grouped by subjects and arranged to show the dates on which the papers will be read.

3. If too many papers are submitted, subsections could be created, to convene simultaneously, in fields of widely divergent interest: e.g., one for persons actively engaged in the institutional care of leprosy patients, another for teachers or practicing dermatologists, perhaps another for pathologists.

4. If case presentations or dermatological meetings are to be scheduled, direct conflicts with the major program of the Congress should be avoided.

5. The chairman and secretary of each session should be clearly instructed as to their duties. The chairmen should conduct the sessions instead of merely ornamenting them. They should crack the whip when speakers read so rapidly that the interpreters have trouble, and for this purpose he and the secretary should constantly monitor the translations, and stop the speakers if they are not coming through. They ought, if possible, to be more or less polylingual, but it does not take much of that facility to stop the speakers when they should be stopped, or to warn them to go slowly if that is called for. This may seem to be a small matter at the moment, but it is an important one in the meeting, where many of the delegates have travelled thousands of miles in order to hear what the speaker is saying. The speaker himself has presumably labored long and assiduously to obtain the information which his paper imparts, and would wish its content to be made known to as many of the audience as possible.

6. The secretary should make a careful record, and turn into the secretariat at the end of the session, of what papers were on the program to be read, what ones were actually read, what ones were "read by title" by previous understanding, and what ones were not read because of absence of the author. Without such records the congress authorities are greatly handicapped, both during the time of the meeting and afterward.

Lesser matters deserving of some attention are:

1. The desirability of expediting registration by separating already-enrolled delegates from those not yet enrolled, and perhaps providing separate windows for separate languages.

2. The desirability of minimizing daytime social activities or entertainments which can be scheduled for evening hours.

3. The urgency of having an adequate secretarial staff and enough mimeographs to cope with the unavoidable flood of committee reports, which need to be mimeographed in at least two languages in advance of the final plenary session. A secretarial assistant should attend each session, to assist the secretary thereof to keep accurately the records mentioned in paragraph 6 above.

4. The desirability of having separate projection equipment for enlarging 2 x 2 inch (5 x 5 cm.) color transparencies up to the full size of

the projection screen. The standard slide projector shows them only in miniature.

5. The desirability of a souvenir group photograph, omitted at Madrid evidently because of confusion on the last day. The personal, nonscientific side of these Congresses is not without its value and importance, and a memento of this sort contributes something to that side of the picture.

In all of these negative comments, I trust it will not seem implied that I am actually unhappy about the delightful experiences so thoughtfully prepared for us at Madrid by our generous hosts. Nothing could be further from the case. But as experience teaches, I think it is incumbent on us all to learn from it.

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