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## EDITORIALS

*Editorials are written by members of the Editorial Board, and opinions expressed are those of the writers.*

### CONGRESS, CONFERENCE, SYMPOSIUM

All are agreed on the advantages of occasional meetings between those engaged in work in a particular field. The pooling of knowledge is ordinarily accomplished through the medium of journals; but personal contact and discussions, when experts and would-be experts get together, have a stimulating effect to make it possible to reconcile diverging views, remove misunderstandings, and disentangle confused issues in a manner impossible through the written word alone.

One of the two main functions of the International Leprosy Association is to arrange for such meetings, in the form of congresses, which are intended to be held at five-yearly intervals. Three of these have already assembled under the joint auspices of the Association and the governments of the host countries: at Cairo in 1938, at Havana in 1948, and at Madrid in 1953. The Government of India has generously offered its hospitality for the next Congress, to be held in 1958, and if this one is to be as successful as we would wish it to be we must begin plans and preparations well in advance.

In the first issue of THE JOURNAL for 1954, pages 86-90, there were four letters of criticism and constructive suggestions based upon experience of the previous congresses, and particularly that held at Madrid. Similar criticisms had been made after the Havana Congress [THE JOURNAL 17 (1949) 118-119].

The points raised in those communications may be summarised as follows: (1) there were so many papers of varying degrees of importance that there was not time to read them all, and some important papers were omitted; (2) some papers were read so rapidly, in spite of requests to read slower, that the interpreters had to give up trying to translate

them; (3) titles and abstracts of many papers were sent in so late that they could not be arranged in order, printed and circulated in time before the congress; (4) chairman and secretaries, through inexperience, were sometimes unable to perform their functions efficiently; (5) committees should be selected well in advance, should be composed of experts on the particular subject to be considered, and should have an opportunity of knowing beforehand the substance of the papers to be read on their subjects; (6) social and other non-scientific events should be so limited and timed as not to interfere with the main objects of the congresses; (7) there should be arrangements for speedy registration, adequate secretarial staff, and apparatus to suit all forms of picture projection.

These suggestions are all justifiable, and at a congress of the size of the one at Cairo they could be put into effect. But with the numbers attending at Havana and Madrid it is questionable if this is at all possible without radically changing the nature of the arrangements.

Writing as one of those who had to bear the brunt of the technical arrangements at the last three congresses, I must point out the difficulties.

1. The local committee undertook, in addition to the local arrangements, the collection, arrangement, and publication of the abstracts of papers coming from all over the world. Without previous experience of leprosy congresses they found the latter an impossible task, and the technical side of the congress arrangement was handed over to the International Leprosy Association a short time before the congress began.

2. Many of the government delegates did not know whether or not they would be sent by their governments till a week or two before the opening date, and for this reason they delayed to prepare their papers or submit abstracts or even titles.

3. Some of the papers were (in spite of instructions to the contrary) too long to be read in the time allotted, and were hurried over in a way that made it impossible for the audience to follow.

4. Several delegates presented three or even more papers, and it was impossible until the opening day to know how many of these would be read, as some of the leading leprologists had not yet given notice of their papers. In the end they had to be cut down drastically.

In fact, Dr. Lowe's criticism is most apt: "International gatherings attempt to do the impossible; within a few days to 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."

How can we arrange things better in future? The title of this editorial is "Congress, Conference, Symposium." These words indicate three kinds of gatherings which in modern times are being held in increasing numbers, often on an international level. The dictionary defines "Congress" as *a meeting together of ambassadors*, that is, people specially delegated by their respective countries; a "Conference" is an *appointed*

*meeting for instruction or discussion*; a "Symposium" (omitting the original convivial definition) is a *collection of views on one topic*.

Perhaps, while still retaining the ambassadorial nature of our congresses, and welcoming official and non-official delegates, we might compound with it the methods of the conference, and especially of the symposium. Those of us who have attended, or read the reports of, any of the excellent symposiums arranged by the World Health Organisation and other scientific bodies in recent years, can appreciate the efficiency and success of this type of gathering. A few carefully selected workers, representing as far as possible different views and experiences, are called together and each is requested to read a short, carefully prepared paper on the aspect of the subject with which he is most familiar. Thus there is abundant time and facility for discussion and interchange of views by all present.

I would suggest that our future congresses be arranged as follows:

(1) As at previous congresses there should be two committees in charge of arrangements: a local committee set up by the host country, and one consisting of representatives of the I. L. A.

(2) While these two bodies should consult with each other and keep in as close touch as possible, the former should be responsible for all local arrangements and the latter for all technical arrangements (themes, papers, conduct of meetings, etc.)

(3) The local committee should publish, as previously, handbooks and the report of the congress.

(4) Adopting the symposium system, a number of topics should be chosen and for each topic three or four workers of outstanding experience be asked each to prepare and read a paper on that topic.

(5) Titles and abstracts of these papers should be in the hands of the Secretary, I. L. A., four months before the opening day of the congress, so that they may be arranged, printed and supplied to intending delegates well in advance.

(6) The topics for papers and discussion should be divided under six heads: Classification, Treatment, Immunology, Epidemiology and Control, Pathology and Bacteriology, Social Aspects.

(7) Each of these topics should be dealt with in full session, the reading of papers being followed by discussion. From one-half to one day should be allotted for each topic.

(8) Technical committees should be appointed which would co-ordinate the findings on each topic *after* it has been dealt with in full session. They would submit draft reports to the final session.

The advantages of the above suggestions are:

(a) There would be plenty of time for reading of papers and full discussion.

(b) Delegates would be able to be present at all full sessions.

(c) The work of technical committees would be simplified.

(d) While many delegates would not read papers, all would have a chance of putting forward their views in discussion.

It may be that some would not attend the congress who would have attended if they could read papers. We hope that would not occur. In any case, I believe that the method outlined above, perhaps with some slight modifications, is the only way to get down to real work and make definite progress. Several workers whom I have consulted are of the same opinion. In fact, this is nothing new; most congresses in recent years have been conducted along similar lines.

—E. MUIR