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EDITORIALS

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VOTING ON CONGRESS FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the functions of the International Leprosy Association is to organise quinquennial congresses, on each occasion in collaboration with an Organising Committee of the country which is serving as host. Because of its widely scattered nature the Association is able to hold general meetings of its members only when they are gathered together at these congresses. It is usual for the Association to choose at these general meetings the location of the next congress to be held five years later, selection being made from countries from which invitations have been received.

Because there have been misunderstandings in the past, it is important to note that it is the International Association and not the Congress itself whose responsibility it is to choose the countries where congresses are to be held. This is necessarily the case, as it must be a continuing body like the Association which takes the initiative and negotiates with each host country in turn for the holding of each congress. As the result of this initiative taken, the host country forms an Organising Committee which is responsible for local arrangements, the preparation of Congress literature, etc. Most of the other preparations are arranged by correspondence between the local Organising Committee and the Association office bearers. The principal responsibility of the Association is the arrangement of the technical side of the program.

One of the main objectives of the International Congress is to reach sound and stable agreements on technical matters which will be acknowledged and accepted on a world basis. In order to reach such agreements prolonged and careful thought and discussions are required. Points of importance must be reasoned out among a limited number of representative experts with wide practical experience. Without previous careful planning such requirements cannot be met.

Because the time that the Congress is in existence is short, the Association set up many months in advance Interim Panels of carefully selected experts, each panel being responsible for considering a particular theme of the leprosy problem and agenda. The chairman of each panel is in touch with the other members by correspondence, and it is hoped that before the beginning of the Congress much ground work will have been done. It is proposed that, with the consent of the Congress, each panel shall present a symposium on its theme to the Congress as a whole, and that its members who are present shall form the nucleus of the usual technical committee which will further discuss the subjects and prepare a report of its findings and recommendations, to be presented to the final plenary session for acceptance or rejection.

What has been written leads on to a difficult matter about which there has been a good deal of difference of opinion at previous congresses, i.e., the method of voting at the plenary (or business) sessions of the Congress—of which there are two, one at the beginning and the other at the end. On previous occasions each regular member present has had one vote. There is, however, generally a disproportionately large representation of members—at least 30 per cent of the whole—from the host and neighbouring countries; and this situation, not unnaturally, tends to bias the voting in support of their compatriots and their views, especially in the somewhat emotional atmosphere of a large assembly. Another method of voting that has been suggested is to give one vote to each country represented, as in the United Nations, for example—and in the Pan-American Leprosy Conferences. But this plan also is open to objections. Should a large country where leprosy is a major problem, with large numbers of antileprosy workers, have no higher vote than a small country where little antileprosy work is being done, or whose representatives at the Congress may have had comparatively little experience of the disease?

The only way out of this impasse appears to us to be that decisions should be made as much as possible in the calm and judicial atmosphere of the technical committees, leaving as little as possible for decision in the full session where the atmosphere is more excited and where there is a larger proportion of those with comparatively little experience of the matters to be decided. It is essential that all findings and recommendations should have the imprimatur of the Congress as a whole; but to avoid the difficulties of injudicious voting, and in order to arrive at decisions which will meet with world-wide respect and compliance, the following suggestions are put forward:

- (1) Careful selection of technical committees so that they include the most experienced experts, and are at the same time representative of all important points of view.
- (2) Limitation of each technical committee to a workable size. It has been pointed out (CIOMS) that committees of more than four or five mem-

bers are liable to be unwieldly and ineffective. (At the Madrid Congress the number was set at nine, but five or at most seven would be better.)

(3) A strenuous effort on the part of each technical committee to reach unanimous agreement on as many points as possible, voting being avoided as much as is practicable.

(4) The Congress as a whole should use its wisdom in endorsing at least those matters which have been unanimously passed in the technical committees.

(5) Findings and recommendations of technical committees must be either passed or rejected at the plenary session, they must not be amended. It is obvious that any amendment adopted at such a time is unlikely to be an improvement on a decision arrived at in committee after painstaking deliberation.

—E. MUIR