

TO THE EDITOR:

Dr. Wade criticizes some of the reports of the Technical Committees of the Rio Congress (*THE JOURNAL* **32** [1964] 427), "written with much pretense and little knowledge," and he proposes that at any future congress such committees should be small and selected for expertise rather than for political reasons; and that each should be required to submit a formal report by a given date. These proposals, admirable in themselves, do not take full account of the difficulties facing the panels and round tables. This letter is a plea that the whole concept and purpose of the panels should be reconsidered.

It appears to have been the hope that the technical reports would (1) resolve disagreement, (2) advance scientific understanding through discussion, and (3) review the current situation and draw attention to recent progress. To consider the second object first, a committee which is sufficiently comprehensive for the other two purposes is too diverse in its outlook and interests for serious scientific discussion. In considering this point the Bacteriology and Pathology panel at Tokyo gave its opinion "that appointment of a technical committee solely for the Congress (and at the time of the Congress) is undesirable. It leads to compromise rather than to understanding." The advancement of scien-

tific understanding would be better served by the abolition of panels so as to allow time for informal discussion by those with similar interests.

The third object mentioned, a general review, is the easiest to attain, but it can only be achieved in a meaningful manner in the time available if there is already a consensus of opinion among the members of the committee. Agreement exists about most clinical and social aspects of leprosy, but not about many technical and scientific matters.

The causes of dispute are lack of knowledge, the interpretation of evidence according to one's disciplinary background, the geographic variations of the disease pattern of leprosy, the conflicting demands of research and field work, and finally the long-drawn-out course of the disease, which makes the accumulation of experience such a slow process, the results of which one fights to defend, since they are not open to easy verification. The emotion generated in committee engenders pretentious and sometimes empty reports. It would be idle to expect otherwise. Dr. Wade's proposal that committees should be smaller, though good, is limited in its application by the need for adequate representation (if the object is to resolve disagreement). And when he rightly asks that formal reports should be presented by a given date he should reflect also that a whole Congress with its congested time-table lasts but one week, and that a report cannot be considered and discussed if it is not presented until the last day. The fact is that, generally speaking, the proper function of an international scientific committee is not to elucidate a controversial topic but to give official recognition to a well-substantiated advance and to make recommendations to implement it.

In leprosy there are as yet all too few well-substantiated advances, though there are, no doubt, some fields in which discussion might be profitable. It is suggested:

That the subject should be limited, and the terms of reference clearly stated before the committee meets;

That, except for the simplest noncontroversial matters, the committee should hold its meetings before the opening of the Congress, as with the round tables at Rio;

That the committee should be small, that the chairman should be consulted about the membership, and that the membership should never be increased by late appointments at the opening of the Congress;

That a translator should be provided;

That the report should be presented at least 2 days before the termination of the Congress and time allotted for subsequent discussion.

If these requirements cannot be met, much time would be saved by not appointing the committee.

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