

CORRESPONDENCE

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

Education on "Leprosy" is a Dangerous Myth

TO THE EDITOR:

In a letter to the INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEPROSY (38 [1970] 207-209). Dr. R. G. Cochrane states his reasons to conserve the word "leprosy" and criticizes the old and constantly renewed efforts to have it substituted by an acceptable medical designation. With one exception—that a new word could harm fund raising—these criticisms have already been rebutted in articles that I will gladly send to those interested¹, but I beg the kindness to publish this response to the most common argument—that education will solve all the problems that changing the name is trying to correct.

Much is said today about education on "leprosy." The recent intensification of the old fight against this stigmatizing word provoked, in various parts of the world, manifestations about the importance of education. This was already a benefit.

Unfortunately, *that kind of education is impossible.* With some rare exceptions, specifically doctors and some few in the service who educated themselves as a result of study and long contact with the problem, but who frequently do not realize that they constitute those exceptions—nobody else has been or will be educated to accept "leprosy as a disease like any other." If it does happen, the results will not last long; within a few days, weeks at most, they will be destroyed by the intense defamatory antieducation of the classic, modern and contemporary literature, the sensationalistic press, radio and television. This may not be important in England or France, for instance, where happily there is no endemic hanseniasis, or in Asia and Africa, where

¹ "Hanseniasis," the new official name for leprosy in São Paulo, Brazil. Derm. Int. 8 (1969) 40-43. "Leprosy," a psycho-social-somatic illness, is not yet "a disease like any other." Bol. Serv. Nac. Lepra 29 (1970) 101-104 (Portuguese). English translation available (The Neologism Hanseniasis 2 [1970] 36-38).

the word "leprosy" is not current. But it is very serious in Brazil where, unfortunately, both evils are at large—the disease and the word—and whose population, in a great majority, learn to fear and repel "leprosy" and "lepers" since their earliest childhood contacts with religious texts: deeply rooted prejudices are formed that no future attempts of education will ever eliminate as any psychologist would confirm. It is important also in most of Latin America, according to numerous and trustworthy reports that any inquiry would ratify. Take, for instance, the pessimistic conclusion of the Seminar of the PanAmerican Health Organization (Guadalajara, Mexico, 1968) that education "leprosy" simply did not work up to date.

Comparing "leprosy" with syphilis, tuberculosis, cancer, etc., as many hansenologists do, and saying that it will also be accepted someday thanks to education or to the eventual discovery of an efficient therapy, is not realistic: "leprosy" is the famous pejorative which became, rather than a medical term, a terrifying anti-educative and anti-integrative "label of primary force," verbal and psychologically attached to the worst superstitions of the Western World. No other disease bears such millenary load that started with erroneous translations of the Bible; no other name (whose synonyms in Brazilian dictionaries are "filth," "vice," "repulsiveness," "nauseating thing," "rottening") is so often used and abused to insult and defame, stigmatizing so strongly and so decisively hindering the cooperation of the patients and their families. For each unit of education there are at least some thousands of anti-educational units transmitted by the press and all other powerful media, against which there will never be enough resources or personnel to fight.

In regard to treatment, let us ask one

unquestionably cured patient, the 3-plus Mitsuda-positive man, whose single tuberculoid lesion disappeared spontaneously some 30 years ago, to identify himself as a "healed case of leprosy." Of course, he will never do it, under the penalty of losing friends and jobs, and of becoming immediately a "leper" and social outcast, together with his whole family.

Changing the name and taking a fresh look at education around the formula "new substitute, formerly leprosy," associating the former with progress and discarding the latter gradually, this is the technic being used in São Paulo, where nobody is being misled (as many misinformed critics suppose). We are based on the conclusions of two Brazilian Congresses of Hygiene and on a suggestion of a sizeable group of the Guadalajara Seminar. It is certainly a difficult task as is everything else in hansenology. But it is possible, although no results should be expected before a generation.

To educate about "leprosy" is not difficult—it is impossible. Some day, perhaps within the next 30 to 50 years, organizations and congresses will finally open their eyes and try to avoid another somber declaration of the Guadalajara type, at least to help in eradicating the disease in Latin America. It will be sufficient, then, to extend the

international condemnation of the word "leper" prevailing since 1931, to the term "leprosy" as well, because as long as this term exists, "leper" will inevitably coexist, victimizing patients, families and prevention.

Much unnecessary misfortune will occur until then. In the meantime, in the State of São Paulo, Brazil, with the valuable support of more than 12 medical schools and more than 300 dermato-hansenologists, social workers and educators in Brazil, as well as in 27 other countries on all the Continents, we shall continue to use the term "hanseniasis" of the "Nomenclatura Dermatologica Brasileira." And we shall do our best to avoid that the 1,800 odd patients that are diagnosed every single year in this state—half of them tuberculoid and indeterminate—become also "lepers" and social outcasts. To their somatic problems, relatively light, we are not going to consciously add the burden of suffering imposed by the ignominious diagnosis "leprosy."

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