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EDITORIALS

Editorials are written by members of the Editorial Board, and occasionally by guest editorial writers at the invitation of the Editor, and opinions expressed are those of the writers.

We Know More About Leprosy Than We Think We Do

It seems almost juvenile to suggest to a scientific community the value of familiarity with pertinent literature. Yet, repeatedly while traveling in various parts of the world during the past two decades we have met competent medical scientists, just developing an interest in the potentials of leprosy study, who have enthusiastically made the equivalent of the remark, "Leprosy is a confused mess. I'm going to take a new look at it without being encumbered by the past." And we admit, that while some who have made the equivalent remark have not been heard from again, others have made contributions. We also note with mild envy and broad admiration interpretive contributions to leprosy understanding from specialists with little or no first-hand experience with leprosy as a disease. On the other hand, one listens to and reads with astonishment of theories, speculations, proposed research and conclusions presented against which there is available a long-accumulated body of observational understanding; and of "new" observations for which there is previous documentation. An extreme example was recently provided by a sincere, helpful housewife whose acknowledged, unfulfilled ambition is to "see a leprosy bacillus through a microscope." She submitted for publication "with love" a long, random-

ly reasoned dissertation which, as near as we can understand it, holds that *M. leprae* are derived in each infected patient by conversion from rickettsia passed to them by insects. In its detachment from literature the proposal seems but an exaggeration of others heard. For example? Well one not infrequently hears the idea put forth that lepromatous leprosy is lepromatous "because of" paralysis or alteration of the immune system by over-load of antigen by virtue of the masses of bacilli found in lepromatous patients. What of the indeterminate case, with single or few lesions containing relatively few bacilli, which already shows lepromatoid features and which relentlessly progresses to the *Leonine facies* status if untreated? To agree that the mass of antigen present in full blown lepromatous patients may produce secondary alterations in their immune response is a far cry from agreeing that "because of" such antigen overload the disease becomes lepromatous. Though the nature of the immunopathologic defect in leprosy is still in the process of determination and documentation, probable sequences are attested to by astute observations of some who have long been observing the disease and who have made sound observations that stand as guide-posts to progress.

The names of those who have provided these guideposts are many and it is not our present purpose to attempt a listing. To list just the equivalent of the fingers of one hand, in our own early experience the tutelage of the writings and observations of Jeanselme, Muir, Mitsuda, Wade and Cochrane were invaluable in our own groping toward understanding. They, and many others, are represented in the pages of this JOURNAL from its first issue in January, 1933. We take pride in the knowledge repository that these pages represent and we recognize equally sister English language repositories such as "Leprosy Review" and "Leprosy in India" as well as respected non-English publications which often contain a wealth of observational information often lost to the English-limited reader. We recently found such a mine of information in the "La Lepro" Japanese language papers. Some years ago we had occasion and opportunity to work through all the issues of the "China Medical Journal" and to abstract all references to leprosy, to our edification. The immediate present usually presents no major problems; on this most of us are glib and gung-ho. Comprehension of the repository of knowledge does not lend itself to quick publications but it does lead to maturing judgment and helps prevent false starts.

True, the mass of writings is confusing in some respects, for knowledge grows through individual, often unrelated probings of the unknown. Retrospectively, however, a line of solid reasoning and knowledge develops,

and now forgotten observations have led to later observations. To the wise no reminder is necessary. To the confused we offer the reminder that some two millenia ago Confucius wrote, "To study without thinking is wasteful. To think without study is dangerous."

Philosophical reflection alone does not, however, lend much practical assistance. Therefore the JOURNAL is engaged in two practical projects aimed at completion by the Tenth International Leprosy Congress (Bergen, Norway, August 13-18, 1973). Since this is the Centennial Congress of Hansen's discovery of *M. leprae*, a *Festschrift* in honor of the triumverate of Hansen, Danielssen and Boeck is in preparation. The *Festschrift* will be a supplementary issue of planned content and is therefore not open to generally submitted manuscripts. In addition to several planned, historical items, it will build on the design of the Congress. The Congress returns to the practice of establishing panels to provide brief summaries of present understanding and practice in many areas of leprosy interest. The chairmen of these panels have kindly agreed to provide for the *Festschrift*, papers on the past century's advances in understanding in their fields.

The second project just getting underway is the production of a cumulative index for the first forty volumes of this JOURNAL (i.e., through 1972). It is being recommended that hereafter the JOURNAL provide such a cumulative index every five years. —O. K. Skinsnes