

Victor George Heiser, M.D.

1873-1972

Dr. Victor George Heiser, the first president of the International Leprosy Association, died in New York City February 27, 1972, at the age of ninety-nine. His intense interest in leprosy, which began on his assignment in 1903 to the Philippines by the U.S. Marine Hospital Service, persisted throughout his entire life. His autobiography, *An American Doctor's Odyssey*, published in 1936, described his colorful career in fighting and controlling disease.

Heiser was born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, on February 5, 1873. On May 31, 1889, he was orphaned at the age of 16 when the great Johnstown flood swept away his entire family. Working as plumber and carpenter to earn money for education he studied mechanical engineering in Chicago for a year, but influenced by a physician living in his boarding house he turned his interest soon to medicine. In 1897 he received the M.D. degree from Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. After a year's internship at the Lankenau Hospital in Philadelphia, he went to Washington, D.C. on a vacation. While there, by chance, he took a grueling two-weeks examination for a commission in the U.S. Marine Hospital Service, forerunner of the U.S. Public Health Service. He was among 3 of a group of 42 candidates who received a prized commission. He was soon involved in quarantine and immigration work in



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New York. In 1903, after special details in Europe on health problems among immigrants and in Egypt to study bubonic plague, he was sent to Manila to be the Chief U.S. Quarantine Officer. Two years later he was appointed by the U.S. Government as Director of Health in the Philippines, on leave from the Public Health Service. In that capacity he worked incessantly in

efforts to control cholera, plague, smallpox, hookworm, leprosy, yaws, and malaria, all of which were major problems. Heiser was president of the Philippine Medical Association in 1905. Appalled by the enormity of the leprosy problem in the Philippines, he pressed for legislation requiring all bacteriologically positive patients to be segregated. At that period no other measures for control were available. It was then that his well-known association with Culion began.

Chaulmoogra oil by mouth was the accepted treatment, but many patients could not tolerate it. Heiser tried any modification that gave promise and urged chemists to investigate the development of preparations of chaulmoogra oil that could be given by injection. In 1915 he left the position of director of health in the Philippines to join the Rockefeller Foundation as director for the East of the International Health Board. He circled the world by ship 17 times in initiating and following programs funded by the Foundation that were designed to improve public health and upgrade medical education in the Orient.

Because of his experience and keen interest in leprosy, Heiser was among the 22 leprologists and other scientists selected for participating in the Manila Conference convened by the Leonard Wood Memorial in January 1931. The organization of the International Leprosy Association resulted from this Manila Conference. Heiser was elected as its first president. In 1934 he retired from the Rockefeller Foundation. Shortly after retirement he wrote and had published his engrossing autobiography *An American Doctor's Odyssey*, which included vivid descriptions of the status of public health and medical education in the Orient during the period of his active duty. This book, published by the W. W. Norton Company of New York, a Book of the Month Club selection for 1936, was translated into 14 languages.

Throughout the almost four decades of his retired life, Heiser maintained keen active interest in health problems. He was the author of two other books, *You're the Doctor* (1939) and *Toughen Up, America* (1941). He assisted industries, cities and

states in their efforts to establish sound health programs.

His intense interest in tropical medicine was retained until his death. He attended regularly meetings of the New York Society of Tropical Medicine. At the age of 94, at a symposium on American Contributions in the History of Tropical Medicine held at the Tropical Disease Center in New York City, he presented a comprehensive paper on "Reminiscences on Early Tropical Medicine." This interesting paper, written in the characteristic Heiser style, was published in the *BULLETIN NEW YORK ACADEMY-MEDICINE* in 1968. He was an active participant at the meetings of the New York Society of Tropical Medicine until shortly before his death.

Much of his attention in his later years was on leprosy. He was always eager to meet with scientists working in leprosy and most appreciative of any information sent him dealing with progress in the battle against it. He studied with great interest the recent optimistic reports on the use of BCG in the prevention of leprosy. He repeatedly urged members of the Advisory Medical Board of the Leonard Wood Memorial to plan and initiate a program utilizing BCG vaccine in leprosy control.

As a member of the Advisory Medical Board of the Leonard Wood Memorial, at the end of the first five years of publication of the *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEPROSY* Heiser recommended that the Board of Trustees of the Memorial continue meeting the Journal's annual deficit. He told the Board that, because of the small number of workers in the field of leprosy, the *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEPROSY* could never become self-supporting. In 1967, approximately 30 years later, when he was told that his statement on the future of the Journal had been prophetic, he began making annual contributions for its support.

Nearly four decades after he was elected its first president, he sent a special message to the Association at the Ninth International Congress, meeting in London in 1968. In this message (*INTERNAT. J. LEPROSY* 36 [1968] 549) he said, "Rays of light are beginning to penetrate the darkness . . . but

a disturbing specter has appeared. It looks as though the prevalence of leprosy is increasing. Obviously better prevention methods will be needed before this disease is brought under control."

On this 96th birthday February 5, 1969, the Damien-Dutton Society announced that Dr. Heiser had been selected for the 1969 Damien-Dutton Award in recognition of his active interests for more than half a century in the leprosy problems of the world.

Heiser was widely honored for his achievements. He was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Science by Jefferson Medical College (1911), Rutgers Uni-

versity (1917) and Thiel College (1939). The Jefferson Medical College also presented him with its Alumni Achievement Award. In 1968 Temple University made him a Doctor of Laws.

At the age of nearly one hundred Victor Heiser was still remarkably keen in his appreciation and understanding of public health problems. He was equally concerned with their solution. This influence has not ceased with his death. He will remain for years to come as a symbol of what the International Leprosy Association is trying fervently to accomplish.

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