Tenth International Leprosy Congress

The Tenth (Centennial) International Leprosy Congress, meeting in Bergen, Norway, 13-18 August, was the largest ever held since the meetings began in 1897. There were more than 1,000 participants, 400 more than were expected, from 77 countries. More scientists involved in basic medical research than ever before participated in the sessions.

The Congress was held in Bergen to celebrate the centennial of the discovery of the leprosy bacillus by one of Bergen's most famous sons, Gerhard Armauer Hansen. Under his penetrating gaze as shown in immense photo blow-ups dominating the sessions, some of the outstanding leprologists of our time reported on new drugs, new animal models for research, new technics of immunotherapy, advances in basic research. But sober realism was the prevailing mood. There were still no final answers to the disease whose cause was discovered a hundred years ago.

Norway's monarch welcomed the Congress and paid homage to Hansen. His Majesty King Olaf V of Norway, Patron of the Congress, attended the opening ceremonies in which Hansen and his landmark contributions to medical science were lauded by government officials and Congress leaders. Later he met for lunch with the Council of the International Leprosy Association.

In a foreword to the Congress program, His Majesty expressed the hope that "the Congress will go farther along the road that Armauer Hansen opened up and that its results may contribute to the final and total elimination of the scourge of mankind that goes by the name of leprosy."

Norway's Minister of Social Affairs, Mrs. Bergfrid Fjose, called for greater efforts to find a way of preventing leprosy. "Armauer Hansen laid the foundation of modern leprosy research when he discovered the bacillus 100 years ago," she said. "It is our hope that his monumental work will be supplemented by methods for cultivating the bacillus, so that in the future it will be possible to produce an effective vaccine."

WHO leprosy chief called for more research. Dr. Hubert Sansarricq, Chief, Leprosy Unit, World Health Organization, stressed the necessity of encouraging "all research likely to lead to speedy improvement of control methods."

The last decade has been marked by substantial advances in our knowledge of leprosy," he said, "particularly in regard to bacteriology, the experimental disease and immunology. But neither drug trials, though many have been made, nor attempts at prevention by BCG vaccination has provided us with a particularly effective weapon against the disease."

Other speakers at the opening ceremony at the Concert Hall included the Mayor of Bergen, Professor Ole Myrvoll; Chairman of the Congress Organizing Committee, Professor Erik Waaler; and the president of the International Leprosy Association, Dr. Jacinto Convit of Venezuela. At a commemorative ceremony in the Botanical Garden, a wreath was laid at Armauer Hansen's bust and the delegates were welcomed by Dr. Stanley G. Browne, secretary of the Association, and Professor A. J. Henrichsen, rector of the University of Bergen.

Congress organized into eight sections. The Congress was divided into eight sections or committees which submitted reports dealing with advances in the following areas: microbiology, experimental chemotherapy, immunopathology, experimental leprosy, epidemiology, therapy, control and rehabilitation. More than 300 papers, simultaneously translated in French, English and Spanish, were read during the 21 sessions in Bergen's Student Center.

Leprosy, a model for study of immunologic phenomena. The present widespread scientific interest in immunology was reflected in the three sessions on advances in immunopathology, chaired by Dr. Olaf K. Skinsnes, Director, ALM Leprosy Atelier, University of Hawaii, and Dr. T. Godal, Armauer Hansen Research Institute, Addis Ababa. There were 69 papers directly related to immunologic studies and numerous others indirectly related to the subject.

According to the committee report the great strides that have been made in the last few years in understanding the nature of

immunological defects in leprosy are due not only to advances in the transmission of the leprosy bacillus to animals, but also to recent progress in basic medical research. This research has provided methods to study in detail the host/parasite interaction in the patient himself.

The report stressed the importance of establishing and supporting laboratories in leprosy-endemic areas where immunopathological studies can be undertaken on materials from leprosy patients. There was agreement that leprosy provides a unique model for the study of immunopathologic phenomena in human disease.

Report on new drugs. In marked contrast to the over-optimism of the earlier era of the sulfones, hailed widely during the 40's and 50's as "miracle" drugs, new methods of treatment were described with cautious optimism.

Both clofazimine, effective in sulfone resistant cases and in severe lepra reactions, and rifampicin, a potent antibiotic which seems to kill the leprosy bacillus more rapidly than any other drug, are still far too expensive for widespread use. The consensus was that the parent sulfone, diaminodiphenyl-sulfone, continues to be the treatment of choice in uncomplicated leprosy.

The Committee on Therapy, chaired by Gen. J. Languillon, Institute of Leprology, Dakar, Senegal, recommended that lepromatous cases should be treated for life.

Change of emphasis in leprosy rehabilitation. An important change of emphasis in leprosy rehabilitation was reported by the Committee on Advances in Rehabilitation, chaired by Dr. O. W. Hasselblad, President, American Leprosy Missions, and Dr. Jose Arvelo of Venezuela.

The committee urged that prevention of disabilities be the responsibility of primary patient care and not left to a rehabilitation team. It was emphasized that special technics to prevent physical disability are basic to the medical care of every patient who has suffered peripheral nerve damage, whether or not rehabilitation specialists are available.

The costs of caring for the totally disabled, said the report, are much greater than the costs of prevention and control. For the totally disabled, the committee urged that permanent provision be made consistent with human dignity and decency. "In principle, the creation of segregated facilities for whatever reasons, for patients whose disabilities arise from a particular disease such as leprosy, must be deprecated." Such facilities, it added, are almost always "dehumanizing and unjust."

Animal models. Reports on animals used in experimental transmission of the leprosy bacillus included the mouse, the rat, the Korean chipmunk and the armadillo. Nine papers were presented on the significant research on experimental leprosy in the armadillo at the USPHS Hospital, Carville, Louisiana, and the Gulf South Research Institute, New Iberia, Louisiana.

From the many experimental studies of the infected animal have come much data concerning infection and infectivity, lesions in the skin, the nasal mucosa, the nerves and the deep organs. Yielding large amounts of the leprosy bacilli, the armadillo seems to offer the greatest hope in future research and brings closer the possibility of the production of a vaccine.

Lack of progress in leprosy control. The report of the Committee on Advances in Leprosy Control, whose chairman was Dr. Luiz M. Bechelli, University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, was not as optimistic as reports of advances in other fields of leprology. The admitted lack of progress in control, according to the committee report, is due mainly to the present unavailability of an ideal drug or specific vaccine. Another important drawback, it pointed out, is the continuing irregularity of treatment, in spite of all efforts to prevent it.

Because of the "prevalence and duration of leprosy, plus its unique characteristics and socio-economic implications," the committee called for "special priority in public health programs and in research."

In a discussion of inpatient care, the committee said that facilities for temporary hospitalization for acute illness must be provided. "However," it added, "institutional isolation of infectious cases, even temporary, is no longer recommended."

Leprosy fund raisers warned against emotional exploitation. In a paper on the role of voluntary agencies in leprosy work, Mr. A. D. Askew, Deputy General Secretary, The Leprosy Mission, London, warned against

the "emotional exploiting of human suffering resulting from untreated leprosy."

This may raise funds, he said, but it can "also perpetuate misconception and reinforce prejudices which hinder antileprosy campaigns." Another danger in leprosy fund raising, he said, was that "field policies may be influenced by fund raisers who may assess antileprosy measures by their degree of 'appeal' to donors, rather than by their effectiveness in controlling leprosy."

GENE PHILLIPS, *American Leprosy Missions*
OLAF K. SKINSNES, *ALM Leprosy Atelier*