

CLOSING REMARKS

Dr. Yo Yuasa
ILA President

Dr. Zhang Wen Kan, The Minister
Dr. Cao Rong Gui, The Vice Minister
Honorable guests
Dear Colleagues
Ladies and Gentlemen:

"This was certainly something different. This was no usual international conference with empty meeting halls and full reception room, a potpourri of speeches, reports and superficial discussion. This was a serious conference with a clear theme and practical purpose, attended by participants anxious to go deeply into questions, and to set practical actions on the right road."

The above quote is a slightly paraphrased version of Dr. Jessner's introductory summary of the Proceedings of the first International Leprosy Congress in Berlin in 1897.

I am happy to say, that I can use almost the exact words to describe what we have done over the last 6 days. It was indeed a serious, a very serious gathering, certainly on the part of the organizers and, according to my observations, on the part of many participants as well. We had a clear, unifying main theme "Working Toward a World Without Leprosy," with practical purposes of undertaking actions which will lead us to this goal. There was a remarkable degree of active participation as shown on the first day's open forum on the "Future of ILA," or at the Q/A session after Open Panel discussions in the morning of Days 2, 3 and 4, or in the plenary sessions of Day 5.

With that first Congress in Berlin, the modern fight against leprosy had started, which made noteworthy progress and brought us to where we stand now. With this 15th Congress in Beijing, we are starting the second century of our fight which should, hopefully, take us to our stated goal.

Obviously, to my great relief, the radically altered structure of the daily program has been accepted at least on this occasion,

perhaps more actively than just passively, making this Congress more "integrated" and "participant friendly" than before.

The "forward looking" and "action-oriented" nature of the Congress has also been apparently understood, accepted and mostly realized in general, thanks no doubt to the effort of the three moderators of Days 2 to 4, Prof. Smith, Dr. Walter and Dr. Krahenbuhl, and with the active collaboration of the speakers on the "Current Issues," members of the Panel, and chairpersons and members of the workshops. I am grateful to the participants who tolerated inconveniences due to schedule alterations.

Of course there were a number of criticisms, shortness of workshop was one heard most frequently, but it was part of a more general complaint on overcrowding of the program in 6 days. If we had a luxury of 10 days or 2 weeks, we could have organized the program with more breathing space in between and less concurrent sessions. As I mentioned in the Program Guide, this Congress was an experiment and we, the Organizing Committee, have learned much from this experiment in order to plan better for future Congresses.

As Chairperson of the Organizing Committee for this Congress, I would like to thank all of the participants for their understanding, patience and collaboration which made this Congress a success as far as it went, and now I am uncrossing my fingers with a great sense of relief.

Dr. Jessner's introduction also included the following: "At this conference there was a will to work, knowing that it was not preaching to deaf ears or preparing worthwhile material just to be quietly filed away, knowing rather that its outcomes would be put into practice as soon as possible."

The first Congress 100 years ago was organized in response to the German government's need to do something about the sudden influx of leprosy patients among

Russian migrant workers. The government was eager to receive the recommendations of the Congress.

Our situation today is almost opposite. With a successful "Elimination Program," many governments are lowering their political commitments, if not totally losing their interest. Indeed, we may be preaching to deaf ears in some cases. So what happens after this Congress, if anything happens at all, depends on how each of you, the participants of this Congress, take the initiative in putting what we have identified as important items into practice. The real value of this Congress will be judged by what happens over the next 5 years as a result of this meeting. Judging from serious discussions which took place during the Congress, I am rather optimistic that something useful will take place. But in order to ensure that, I have asked the members of the new Council to take the responsibility of following up some of the recommendations of the workshops.

In this connection, I was happy to observe that many of you have attended sessions outside of your specialty. By participating in most of the plenary sessions, you now have a better understanding of your own future contribution within a total context of "Working Toward a World Without Leprosy." One new feature of this Congress was involvement of so many persons affected by leprosy themselves, as regular participants and not just guests. I trust that their potential contribution as our partners in our future work is now recognized and accepted.

"A nation without vision will perish" says Proverbs of the Old Testament. So is an association and our vision is to achieve "A World Without Leprosy."

However, some people may have some confusion as to our exact goal because of my presentation on the opening day. I shall be most happy if we can reach "A World Without Leprosy" but, to be honest, it is most unlikely that we will reach such an Utopian state in any foreseeable future. But that is not a reason to discard such a goal; instead we should acknowledge it to be an

ultimate goal. Hope is a great promoter of our endeavor.

"A world without problems related to leprosy, both medical and social" is a much more down-to-earth goal than a celestial goal of "a world without leprosy." It is more likely to be achievable. It enables us to plan realistic actions which could solve these problems one by one.

This Congress has identified many issues which need our immediate attention and has made suggestions for solving some of them. It is up to us to take up these challenges. If we fail to solve them, we have no one but ourselves to blame.

This Congress stressed the need to form and to strengthen partnerships or alliances among those involved in leprosy. ILA certainly will try to be a trustworthy member of the group, together with WHO, ILEP, ILU, IDEA and, hopefully, many others.

I trust that all of you here are the willing partners of our work over the next 5 years. Therefore, I look forward to meeting with you in Brazil, in the year 2003, to report what progress we have made on the issues this Congress has identified as important, and then to plan for the future actions needed in order to get ever closer to "a world without problems related to leprosy, both medical and social."

Before closing, I would like to thank the Ministry of Health of the People's Republic of China, our official host and supporter, and its officials and staff members, especially Prof. Yin Dakui and Dr. Wan Zhao of the Organizing Committee and Mr. Cai Dong Qian of the local secretariat. Without their full-hearted collaboration, this Congress could not have been organized as well as it was. I also wish to reiterate my thanks to our co-sponsors, WHO and ILEP. The way we managed to work together for this Congress indicates mutually profitable future collaboration toward our common goal.

I now wish you a safe journey home and a successful undertaking of activities in your chosen field.

Thank you for your kind attention.

I now declare that the XVth International Leprosy Congress is closed.