Twenty-first World Medical Assembly

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It may seem strange that the most significant item of business at a World Medical Assembly should be the definition of death, but this was the case in Madrid last week. The second item of significance lay at the other end of the spectrum of human life, with part of the scientific sessions devoted to a consideration of the population problems of the world from medical, demographic, ethical, and legal points of view.

Madrid exercises a civilizing influence on its guests, and perhaps this, as well as the steady influence of the Secretary-General of the World Medical Association, Dr. ALBERTO Z. ROMUALDEZ, was responsible for the civilized manner in which the business of the Assembly was conducted during the week of 10-17 September. An international group of doctors from 32 countries, some with firm views on such matters as ethics or medical economics, is usually good for some display of temper, but in the whole week the only flutter in the Spanish dovescotes was during the scientific sessions, when the exhausted interpreters claimed a break after over four hours on population problems, at a time when about 80 Spanish doctors were clamouring to join in a heated debate which, all euphemisms aside, was concerned with the legitimacy or otherwise of the famous contraceptive pill.

British doctors will be glad to know that when the results of elections for vacant seats on the council of the W.M.A. were declared Dr. DEREK STEVENSON, Secretary of the B.M.A., topped the poll with 57, as against 54 votes for an Uruguayan and 50 for the editor of the *Medical Journal of Australia*, Dr. RONALD WINTON. Also elected was the former French member of council, Dr. J. JONCHÈRES, who has had a busy year in his practice in the cognac country preparing a document designed to show how to define death. Let us hasten to add that this does not mean that doctors are no longer sure when their patients are dead. The trouble arises, as everyone in the profession knows but the laity may not appreciate, because we can now maintain circulation and respiration artificially and there comes a time when the doctor needs to know two things—can he switch the machines off because the patient is in irreversible coma, and can he let his surgical colleagues remove organs for grafting? This has already been well discussed in various meetings, notably the Ciba Foundation symposium in *Ethics in Medical Progress*, at a French meeting on medical ethics in Paris in 1966, by a working group nominated by the Royal Medical Board in Sweden and headed by Professor GUNNAR BRÖCK, by participants at the International Congress of Medical Law in Ghent last August, and no doubt on a thousand and one other less famous occasions. Obviously the crux of the matter is to prove "neurological death," and about this there is still much

argument. For how long must the electroencephalogram be silent before one can assume that brain function has gone for ever? The figures given vary between five minutes and 48 hours, so there is little wonder that the W.M.A. was unable to solve the problem at once. They are keeping the subject under study and will give some guidance as soon as they can.

Medical Education

The medical education committee had started their planning for another world conference on medical education, for the W.M.A. believes that this subject is the concern of all

FIG. 1.—The new President of the World Medical Association, Dr. Alfonso de la Fuente (Spain), taking the presidential oath.

practising doctors and not merely medical educators. After the last conference in New Delhi last November there was a movement by some educators to take the matter out of W.M.A. hands, but W.M.A. feels, perhaps with some justification, that a teacher is not going to admit that his methods are poor unless those he taught tell him so. The next conference will take place somewhere in Europe in 1972 and its theme will be "Medical Education: the Problem of Collective Responsibility." Mr. J. R. NICHOLSON-LAILEY, former Chairman of B.M.A. Council, has been active in promoting this. However, when his committee suggested that at this conference the views of medical students and of patients should be heard there was a horrified reaction from Continental colleagues who had never heard of Mrs. Helen Hodgson and her Patients' Association and felt that patients should be seen but not heard. Nevertheless, they agreed that the conference should give some thought to the interests of patients in their deliberations.

There was a time when discussion of medical economics and its allied problems (still quaintly termed "socio-medical affairs" in W.M.A.) took up a large part of the time allotted to business. Now for some unknown reason the situation has changed. This Assembly devoted very little time to this matter, the most interesting part of the debate concerning the attitude of the medical profession to unacceptable social legislation. The industrious Dr. R. SCHLOEGEL (Germany), who is the expert in this field, presented a paper on this, based on answers to questionnaires from 26 national associations. Nine happy associations (including Sweden, Denmark, and Ireland) foresaw no trouble with their Governments over unacceptable legislation. The rest had adopted a variety of methods of protesting, but were unanimous in condemning the strike method used by other labour forces, though they found it legitimate to refuse to do their work under unacceptable conditions. In disputes between doctors and the Governments, the answers to the questionnaire indicated a certain measure of public sympathy for the doctors, provided of course that the public were not involved in any protest action the doctors took and that they believed the doctors were fighting for principles, not cash. Replies suggested that an important aspect of the problem was comprehensive information of the public and the doctors themselves about the issues at stake.

A matter which will come up for study in this committee next year is medical malpractice. Actions for negligence in the U.S.A. have multiplied beyond all reason, and this plague shows signs of spreading elsewhere. It deserves study on a world scale.

At the ceremonial session Dr. JESUS TAMESIS, of the Philippines, handed over the presidency of the Assembly to Dr. ALFONSO DE LA FUENTE, of Madrid, a thoracic surgeon, who will hold office until August 1968, when the next Assembly meets in Sydney and the office passes to an old friend and former Chairman of Council of W.M.A., Sir LEONARD MALLIN, of Adelaide.

Scientific Sessions

The general theme chosen by our Spanish colleagues for the Assembly was "Humanismo," a word not exactly equivalent to humanism, which has now come to mean a secular movement in the Anglo-Saxon world. Within this framework there were three meetings, if one includes the medical writers' conference—which really amounted to a discussion of pathology in art as exemplified in the works of Velazquez, El Greco, and Goya, all intensely concerned with the human condition of their time. The scientific sessions proper dealt with the population explosion, and with medicine and society.

Family Planning

As could have been predicted, discussion of the population explosion and family planning, which went on for hours beyond the allotted time, generated more heat than light, though two contributions were outstanding for their objectivity and quality. The first was by Professor J. BOTELLA, professor of gynaecology in Madrid, who discussed the action of the oral contraceptives with particular reference to his own work on their effects on ovaries, endometrium, tubes, cervical mucus, and cervical cytology. He explained that, whereas family planning was not allowed in Spain and the Catholic doctor could not prescribe the pills for this purpose, they found legitimate use as therapeutic agents, and all his studies on patients had been in such cases. (My own information is that sales in Spain, presumably for these purposes, have risen rapidly.) Professor Botella also pointed out that the mechanism of action was of great interest to a Catholic doctor. He said: "Putting aside the question of what Rome will decide, contraception through anovulation is not the same as contraception through such a mechanism as that of progestogens alone, which sterilize by (1) killing the morula by impeding its transport through the tube; (2) stopping the sperm from passing through the cervix." Thus it might be licit to use sequential or combined therapy but never progestogens alone, since these were really very early abortifacients. However, until the exact mode of action of oral contraceptives was known—and it was likely a multiple one, with variations according to the preparation used—no further opinions could be expressed.

Demographic Problems

This honest paper was followed by an equally honest summary of the demographic problem by Professor DEL CAMPO, who has the chair of sociology in Madrid. He pulled no punches in stating the case for urgent action to avoid impending widespread famine. For the first time, he said, *Homo sapiens* has to assume responsibility for the environment in which he lives. The problem must be faced; the only question is how to solve it, for birth rates depend on a complex of biological and social factors. A husband and wife may think that they determine how many children they will have, but in fact biology and society decide this for them.

When Professor Del Campo left the platform the theme took off into areas where a humble doctor is lost. Two theologians, recognized international authorities on the

FIG. 2.—A general view of the Assembly at the opening session.

subject, Fathers SIGMOND and ZALBA, performed a series of intellectual acrobatics, but they did make some very valid points. They were anxious, for example, that family planning should never be used for political ends, to keep the powerful nations in power, or to raise living standards without reference to individual happiness. Father Zalba, having laid down a series of norms for use of oral contraceptives, as, for instance, to correct menstrual irregularities or to prevent ovulation in a woman whose health demanded postponement of pregnancy but whose husband would not co-operate, finally expressed the hope that "medical science would find a solution to the population problem more humane than the antioviulatory pill."

The Assembly a day previously had approved a resolution endorsing family planning in principle, though of course it could give no guidance on details.

The last major contribution to the debate on family planning in the scientific session came from a Spanish lawyer, and was chiefly notable for an unfortunate excursion into the fields of statistics and medical science, in which a certain amount of mythology replaced scientific fact. The following quotation is a good example: "Everyone knows that an organ which does not carry out its function is a sick organ, and that sexual excitation without fertilization is responsible for numerous disorders, just as are masturbation and the use of chemical spermicides; even condoms affect male virility." All in all, contraception took a lot of punishment during the subsequent discussion, though two participants swam against the stream. An American Catholic physician said that if he had a dollar for every woman who had asked him for the pill he would

be rich, and another doctor said bluntly that he preferred contraception to abortion, and these were the two alternatives. Unfortunately the Spanish press printed on Sunday, 17 September, under the heading "Conclusions of the XXI World Medical Assembly," without confirmation from either Council or the Secretariat, a report which may give the impression that W.M.A. is against the use of oral contraceptives. This of course is not so.

Medicine and Society

With the second session on medicine and society peace returned. Drs. DE LA QUINTANA and DE CALDAS made sweeping historical surveys to demonstrate how the evolution of social thought and of social structures had affected the practice of medicine. The doctor may think he is free within the limits of contemporary medical science, but he is not; what he does and how he does it are very much conditioned by what society thinks about sickness and health (witness the contrast between the Greeks, who were against the treatment of persons with basic physical or mental defects, and the early Christians, who regarded suffering as ennobling) and by how society is structured. The third lecture in this session looked at the problem from another angle. Professor LOPEZ IBOR, a psychiatrist of international reputation, looked at the influence of the changes in modern society on the training of the medical student. He felt that we needed a new type of doctor, but we must make our educational experiments slowly, with pauses to assess the results. As a psychiatrist he was of course concerned about the tendency to dehumanize medicine and the need to counteract it.

It was altogether a useful week, and there were welcome signs that W.M.A. is gathering steam. People worked harder and played less, and most significant was the fact that for the first time in many years the Treasurer, Dr. E. FROMM (Germany), could come to the rostrum and announce that last year W.M.A. balanced its budget with a little to spare. Even the publications business is looking up, for next year both the Canadian Medical Association and the Australian Medical Association are going to distribute the *World Medical Journal* to all their members, while other associations are looking into the possibility of following suit. Once more also the *British Medical Journal* is taking an active part by preparing a supplement to the standard reference book *World Medical Periodicals*.

FIG. 3.—The platform party at the opening session. (From left to right) Dr. Stanley Gilder, Editor of the *World Medical Journal*; Miss Margaret Natwick (W.M.A. Headquarters Staff); Dr. Alberto Romualdez, Secretary General of the W.M.A.; (mainly hidden), Dr. Garcia Orcyoyen, the Spanish Director General of Health; Dr. Jesus Tamesis, of the Philippines, the retiring President of the W.M.A.; Dr. Gerald Dorman (U.S.A.), Chairman of the W.M.A. Council; and Dr. Ernst Fromm (West Germany), Treasurer of the W.M.A.