SEVENTEENTH MEETING OF THE
PAHO ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON MEDICAL RESEARCH

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Few areas of health research have awakened so much interest and been so controversial as the field of research in health services. Some do not even regard this as a proper area for scientific study, whereas others believe that it is the only type of study that can be justified in developing countries whose resources are so scarce that they must be devoted to those forms of investigation that are most productive and whose results are most immediately applicable, such as health services research. There is neither a definition nor a precise or widely accepted formulation of what should be regarded as health services research. Let us take as an example the definition adopted by the special informal consultant group of the World Health Organization, composed of members of the headquarters Advisory Committee on Medical Research, some outside consultants and members of the Secretariat. They describe health services research as "the systematic investigation and evaluation of a country's health services in terms as much of their inter-relationship with all health connected factors, as of their feasibility, need, coverage, effectiveness, utilization, cost and efficiency. Health services research is by nature multidisciplinary and ideally should result in improvements in the decision-making process and in the optimal use of resources" (4). In a meeting of experts, such as the present one, there will undoubtedly be some who regard this definition as unsatisfactory because it is excessively restrictive or overambitious, or because it fails to include methodological elements or because it lays more emphasis on evaluation than on other factors, such as the diagnosis or levels of medical care. Whatever the basis for dissatisfaction with this definition may be, it represents a point of departure and a good reason why PAHO's Advisory Committee on Medical Research should devote the greater part of its time at its XVII Meeting.

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to the discussion of this problem and to the formulation of recommendations, not only to provide guidelines for the policies to be adopted in promoting research in health services in the Americas Region but also to indicate what the Organization's position should be with respect to the design and structure of the projected WHO Special Program on Health Services Research, in which the collaboration of the regions is being solicited. (5)

Let us first make some comments on the organization and structure of the Meeting not only in deference to the subject of this paper but also in order to obtain a better idea of what is expected of the Meeting and also to explain why, on a number of occasions, more or less substantial periods of time have been devoted to discussion. Before initiating discussion on the principal topic of our meeting we shall hear two important statements, one from Dr. Berghström, who in his capacity as chairman of WHO's Advisory Committee on Medical Research is bringing us an invitation to collaborate with that Committee and coordinate our activities with it and with those of other regions. Such collaboration was given an additional impetus at the corresponding meeting at Geneva last year through the attendance of all the chairmen of Regional Committees and of the regional consultants responsible for coordination and promotion in each region. Included in the agenda for Thursday's executive session is a study on Dr. Berghström's recommendations that the PAHO Committee should decide what policy can best be adopted to bring about closer collaboration with the other Committees of WHO.

Since the presentation by Dr. A. Lucas, Director of the Special Program for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, in which he reported to us last year (3) on the scope and projected future of that program, we have believed that the Advisory Committee on Medical Research should receive periodical reports on the progress made in its implementation. This is why we requested two of our members, Dr. T. Weller and Dr. Lobato Paraense, who are members of two important bodies directing the Tropical Diseases Program, to report to us on what has been done and is to be done in their areas of responsibility. We have also asked Dr. James Lee to provide us with a broader
picture of those activities in which the World Bank has been involved. Dr. Lucas has informed us that he would be extremely interested to have the Committee's impressions, comments and suggestions on the program for which he is responsible.

After sounding the chairman and some members of the Committee on their views and seeking to interpret the directives issued at the XVI Meeting of the Committee last year (1), it was decided to select health services research as the principal topic for the present meeting, a decision that was consistent both with the interests of Member Governments of the Organization and those of PAHO and WHO, which are hoping to obtain from you a better definition of the principles involved as well as a strategy for the use of this scientific mechanism, whose potential appears so promising. For this reason and taking advantage of the presence in the Committee of four distinguished researchers in this field, the program was formulated with a view to providing a conceptual framework for the topic that would serve as a point of reference at successive stages in its discussion. We were assisted in this by our distinguished guest Professor Haggerty, of the University of Harvard and we should also like to thank Dr. Kerr White for his participation in the planning of the program, while expressing our regret that he could not be with us. In view of the importance of the topics and the quality of the papers available to us, we have thought it wise to allow substantial time for discussion today for the purpose of clearing up any doubts or clarifying any ideas that may have been expressed in the course of Session A.

The introduction this year of samples of the work done by various groups of researchers in the countries of the Americas, interested in various aspects of health research, is a new element that, we believe, will give a certain vitality to the agenda, since it embodies the personal experience of researchers determined to make use of this scientific methodology to resolve the problems of their institutions and of their countries. The choice of these samples has not been based on geographical distribution but on the quality work and with a view to presenting a wide range of topics that exemplify the various aspects and objectives of health services research. It may well be that a rigid or sophisticated methodology has not been adopted in all of these cases
but in each instance an effort has been made to resolve a current problem within the country or the institution where the study has been made. We should like to point out that when we began to plan the agenda we did not think we could expect much assistance but later discovered that there was far more interest in the field than we had expected and, for want of time, we have been unable to include any of the Canadian groups that are making a significant contribution, such as the University of Quebec, any of the groups working on operational research in Mexico, Costa Rica, and El Salvador, as well as a significant study on integrated and community medicine in Panama and some others. We have therefore called Session B "Selected experiments in the Americas".

We have to regard Session C as an invitation to discussion since the intention is to use it to raise a number of problems which, although present in the countries of the Americas, are common to other regions of the world. In the definition of the WHO group on health services research we have already noted that one of the most important objectives of this research is to use it as a means of project evaluation or as a method of improving health conditions and this is why we have asked for the assistance of Dr. de Geyndt whose experience of evaluation is widely recognized, and called on him to help us to gather our thoughts on the potential role of PAHO in the promotion of research studies of this kind that would bring into every health services project an element of evaluative research.

The problem of the shortage of researchers in the area of health services has been acknowledged to be worldwide by Dr. Mahler, the Director of WHO (6), himself. The problem is complex for, in any activity that is by definition multidisciplinary, we cannot speak of the training of a single kind of researcher in health services but must consider the numerous elements of manpower needed for such an activity and that must be oriented to it and to its objectives. These may be administrators, anthropologists, sociologists, epidemiologists, microbiologists or clinical specialists. Mr. Ortiz will refer primarily to the training of a typical member of such a team, the operational researcher, although similar considerations would also apply to the other specialists.
The role of information systems in research into the health services is manifest, as Dr. Ferrero will show, as is, moreover, the absence of these services from the majority of our countries.

As a kind of corollary to the meeting we have asked Dr. de Villiers, Chief of the Health Services Division at PAHO, to tell us how, in his view, the scientific mechanism and methodology to be discussed at the meeting can be used to achieve the basic objective of the IV Special Meeting of Ministers of Health of the Americas, i.e., to extend the coverage of health services to the entire population.

We believe that these four papers will stimulate extensive discussion of the topics and provide a firm basis for the recommendations that we expect to be made at the executive session.

While we are guests at this Regional Center we should like to invite its director, Mr. Sperandio, to report to us on the research being undertaken by his staff, as well as ask the director of BIREME to talk to us about the system of selective dissemination of information in the environmental sciences to which CEPIS is devoting its efforts.

At the end of the agenda two research programs have been introduced that had not been brought to the Committee's notice as they have recently been either initiated or expanded. The first of these is the Collaborative Program for Cancer Treatment, which, as an extension of the LACRIP Program so successively developed by Dr. Litvak, is currently providing opportunities for collaboration between sister institutions in the United States and Latin America. The second affects Peru in particular, a frequent victim of earthquakes, and, in this connection, Dr. de Villiers will talk to us about the handling of disasters and emergency situations.

Lastly, two studies will be presented in the form of progress reports on two activities programmed by the PAHO Human Resources and Research Division. We have asked Dr. Llop to present to the Committee the report of the First Meeting on Research Policies in Area II Countries since, in her capacity as rapporteur (2) and as Director of Research of the Cuban Ministry of Health, she was one of the most active participants in it. It should be pointed out that the Second Meeting has just been held at Sucre, Bolivia, with the
countries of the Andean Region and we hope, before the end of the year, to hold the Meeting on Health Research Policies in the Central American countries. Dr. García will also report on the resources survey for the study made as part of the Impact of Research on Health Systems Project, which was initiated last year in Central America and has currently been extended to Mexico, in association with the National Council of Science and Technology of that country and also to Colombia, Perú and Ecuador, in coordination with their agencies responsible for the direction of health research.

In short, this is the justification of the program of this XVII Meeting of the PAHO Advisory Committee on Medical Research from which so many and such important recommendations are expected, in addition to the theoretical reports of exceptional quality in each of the documents presented.