DIRECTOR'S LETTER

Over the past few years our global perspective on AIDS has changed. We have become more aware of AIDS' impact. We have observed great strains being placed on individuals, families, communities, and nations. We have acknowledged that these strains will get worse. And we have started banding together to see what might be done.

Last May the Thirty-ninth World Health Assembly in Geneva concluded that "the worldwide emergency caused by AIDS will require urgent and globally directed action." Accordingly, it endorsed WHO's coordinating role, the creation of the Special Programme on AIDS, and WHO's global strategy to combat AIDS.

This global mobilization bears some similarity to the successful WHO campaign against smallpox. That campaign likewise seemed to face difficult if not impossible problems at the start. And it demonstrated the axiom still true today that global problems demand global cooperation.

Of course, we in the Americas have become especially aware of the AIDS menace because over 80% of the roughly 60,000 AIDS cases have arisen here. True, a few countries account for nearly all these cases—and for nearly all the estimated 2,000,000 hidden AIDS virus infections in the Americas. But nearly all our countries and territories have reported some cases; and clearly, all are threatened.

Awful though this is, it is no more awful than the fact that 700,000 children die in the Americas each year of preventable diseases. Immunization, oral rehydration therapy, improved nutrition, and other benefits of better coverage with basic health services could prevent most of these deaths. But over 130 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean still lack access to basic health services, and extending those services to them is not easy.

Given the AIDS crisis on top of this, one conclusion is inescapable: We throughout the Americas, as part of a larger world effort, must cooperate on AIDS-related research, screening, treatment, education, and preventive measures aimed at halting transmission and reducing the risk to our peoples. At the same time, we must keep working to expand health coverage and meet our previously stated goals; and we must utilize the AIDS struggle to strengthen health services. In the end, the fight against AIDS can only be won if the health services and systems are prepared for it.

The world is now beginning to mount a major international drive against AIDS. What is needed is for all nations to join together, and for the international community of scientists, health workers, concerned citizens, media, and general public to join together in order to define, develop, and adopt the measures needed to confront this common peril.