Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Health Research

The Advisory Committee on Health Research (ACHR), made up of distinguished investigators from various fields related to health in the Region, is responsible for permanent review of the Pan American Health Organization's research policy. The Research Coordination Office at PAHO, advises the Director on matters concerning research policy and is responsible for administering the PAHO/WHO Research Funds Program, one of the principal instruments for cooperation in the field of research.

The XXVIII Meeting of ACHR was held in Montevideo, Uruguay, from 20 to 23 August 1991. Participants included the Chairman of Global ACHR, WHO, representatives of the national councils on science and technology (CONICYT), of the Network for the Exchange of Researchers for the Development of Latin America and the Caribbean (RIDALC), of the Regional Office for Science and Technology (ORCYT) from UNESCO, and other guests.

The following is a brief summary of the principal subjects discussed and the respective recommendations.

Health Research Situation Analysis in Five Countries in the Region

A discussion took place of the results of five studies financed by the PAHO/WHO Grants Program on the situation of health research in Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, and Venezuela. These studies form part of a line of PAHO/WHO technical cooperation that seeks to enhance the definition of research policies in the countries of the Region. This line of cooperation is of great importance in the current situation in view of the difficulties faced by most of the countries in maintaining the scientific and technical infrastructure built up in recent years and in meeting the challenges they face in mapping out sound research policies that are consonant with the changes taking place throughout the world and the new models of development that are being implemented in the Region.

The results discussed on this occasion refer to the study of the research projects underway from 1987 to 1989, and the scientific output contained in articles published from 1972 to 1988. Among the common features observed was the predominance of an individual approach to the health problem as opposed to a population approach, which accounted for barely 5% of the projects; the small amount of research devoted to technological innovation; the absence of a multidisciplinary approach and the absolute predominance of the medical and biological sciences and of professionals in these areas; the predominance of single researchers in the development of the projects; and the increase in the participation of women in scientific work. The data for projects in progress came from scientific and technical data banks in the countries. This led to certain difficulties, both because of the lack of information and the way it is organized, thereby making it difficult to formulate indicators that would allow deeper analysis of the characteristics of the research being performed in the Region.

In this context, the Committee recommended broad dissemination of the results of this study, given its importance for decision-making on health research policies. It considered the need for continuing to promote studies of this type of a more analytical and qualitative nature and recommended PAHO to encourage Member Countries to strengthen scientific information systems and to cooperate with them in this endeavor. As regards the difficulties encountered in developing health research, the Committee pointed out the absence of material incentives and professional recognition in maintaining existing cadres and attracting young scientists, noting that the origin of the problem lay not only in the lack of resources, but also in the absence of political will at the national level. The Committee recommended that PAHO encourage Member Countries to search for a solution to this overwhelming problem.

PAHO Technical Cooperation in the Field of Health Research

PAHO technical cooperation activities in this field were discussed both in general terms and with regard to specific initiatives, such as the Research Grants Program, the development of a Regional System of Vaccines (SIREVA) and the promotion of Health Systems and Services Research (HSSR).

With respect to cooperation activities related to research carried out by the various units in the Organization, it has been observed that such activities consist of an average of 10% of the resources programmed between 1988 and 1990. This percentage varies according to activity areas, reaching 9.5% in the Technical Programs, 26.3% in the Centers, and 7.6% in the Country Representative Offices. In view of the importance of research activities in PAHO cooperation as a whole, since they constitute the main core of the Organization's fundamental mission—the management of knowledge—the Committee recognized the need to establish an explicit policy for the Organization to follow in this area in orienting its activities and those of Member Countries and recommended setting up an ad
hac subcommittee to work along these lines. Because of the magnitude and the importance of the research being carried out by the Pan American Centers, the Committee considered it appropriate to have a qualitative evaluation of these activities to be performed by external examiners. It also stressed the need for adjusting PAHO's method of programming in order to permit both rapid identification and a clear description of the activities and resources assigned to development of science and technology in the field of health and studies to evaluate their impact.

As regards the Grants Program, an analysis has been made of its effectiveness in terms of the projects submitted and approved since 1985 by country and subject area. It was observed that the index of approval of the proposals has been declining over the years and is currently around 30%. Several priority areas are very poorly represented because of the difficulty in obtaining good projects. The experiences in progress were discussed for greater dissemination and support for the preparation of projects, such as the agreements made with six CONICYT in the Region. The results of 11 projects in a priority area of the Program--biotechnology--were examined. After a discussion of the achievements observed in these 11 projects, the Committee drew attention to their importance and pointed out the isolation of HIV in the sera of patients in four countries, the formulation of two sets of reference sera for HIV, the development of a diagnostic test for HIV using recombinant antigens, and the development of monoclonal antibody tests for the diagnosis of hepatitis-B and malaria. This was achieved with very meager resources (approximately US$200,000) and two years of work, which may be considered an exemplary experience.

With regard to the general situation of the Grants Program, the Committee mentioned the need for maintaining strict scientific criteria for all proposals submitted and recommended that advisory services be increased in order to improve the quality of the projects in less developed areas. It also recommended that the ceiling of US$20,000 be reviewed for every project, in addition to the rule that prohibits increasing the salaries of the principal investigators. It suggested that intercountry collaborative projects be promoted that combine the work of high-level institutions of excellence with emerging groups.

The Committee emphasized the need for better coordination between the Grants Program and other PAHO research support activities so that the funds earmarked to support the training of human resources and institutional strengthening would be related to grants to projects in priority areas, thereby maximizing efforts that are poorly articulated at the present time. Recognizing the strategic importance of the training of human resources, the Committee recommended designating a specific number of long-term fellowships for the training of investigators in centers of excellence at the doctorate and postdoctorate level in biomedical and social sciences, epidemiology, and research on health systems and services.

With respect to the initiative for the development of SIREVA, the Committee initially analyzed the prospects for the development of vaccines in Latin America, pointing out the difficulties in implementing a program of this nature, such as the lack of linkage between programs for the development of science and technology and those for economic and social development, the predominance of research based on individual interests and not on common goals, the lack of financial and human resources, and the lack of a tradition of intercountry cooperation. Notwithstanding these difficulties, elements favorable to an initiative of this kind were identified, such as the progress of scientific knowledge, which is making it possible to develop new, more effective vaccines at low cost; the success of the mass vaccination programs; the expression of political will to strengthen the scientific and technical capacity of the Region in this area in national and international forums; and the relative lack of commercial interest on the part of large companies to develop vaccines for diseases prevailing in the Region.

After a discussion of the goals and strategies of SIREVA and the activities already in progress for its implementation, the Committee manifested its full support for the initiative, recognizing its timeliness and importance, both for scientific and technical development and for basic public health needs. It recommended that the spectrum of candidate vaccines should be expanded as much as possible so as to achieve a better balance between bacterial, viral and parasitic vaccines, not only by virtue of the importance of these diseases, but also because of the need to expand and improve knowledge and technologies in the three fields. Other recommendations referred to strengthening the interest of the countries of the Region in making a political commitment to participate in this initiative; to promoting, concomitantly, the development of vaccines, the development of diagnostic methods for epidemiological studies, and field tests; and to strengthening the linking of relations between universities, companies, financing agencies, and other institutions. Finally, the Committee recognized that the principles that guide SIREVA should also guide behavior with regard to vaccines in general, and not only for those already selected. Experimentation with candidate cholera vaccines would be an example in this regard.

With respect to another PAHO initiative in an area selected for its strategic interest, the Committee
analyzed the HSSR and there was specific discussion of the contribution of the social sciences to HSSR, both with respect to new thematic nuclei and to new approaches and methodologies. It was recognized that along with the exhaustion of old paradigms and the surmounting of false dilemmas such as structural analyses versus microanalysis, an eclectic approach is gathering strength among social scientists that seeks to integrate several prospects as a means of expanding future possibilities. PAHO's initiative in this area seeks to take advantage of these possibilities by selecting the implementation of local health systems as the central theme, which should be understood as areas for the encounter of various rationales, essentially consisting of those deriving from the health institutions and those forged by diverse social groups. This perspective makes it possible to focus on the study of the transactions that take place between these rationales, which in turn should orient the organization of local health systems that minimize the differences between both and create the conditions for a synthesis to neutralize them.

The Committee showed its interest in this approach, strengthening the commitment to change inherent in HSSR and recommending that it should be promoted on the basis of a strategy of articulation between academic groups and the health services. It conceded that although local health systems should continue to be considered as the main objective, other subject areas should also be included, such as those that refer to the impact of the adjustment measures and the process of privatization of the health services, among others. Finally, the Committee mentioned the importance of seeking bridges between PAHO initiatives related to the biological area, such as SIREVA, and those that promote HSSR. Articulation between both would permit greater integration of biological and social approaches and result in mutual enhancement.

Other Subjects

Other subjects were reviewed during the meeting, such as the activities being carried out by RIDALC, which has been recognized as an important mechanism of exchange for the training of researchers that should be taken better advantage of by the countries and by PAHO. Also discussed were some of the activities of the Regional Office for Science and Technology from UNESCO; the activities of the Global Advisory Committee on Health Research of WHO, particularly those being carried out in implementation of resolution on health research approved at the last World Health Assembly (WHA 43.19); and the activities of the Study Group on Health Research for Development, set up to implement the recommendations of the International Commission for Health Research.

(Source: Office of Health Research Coordination, PAHO.)

Diseases Subject to the International Health Regulations

During year 1991, Bolivia reported a total of 83 cases of yellow fever and 52 deaths, from the Departments of Cochabamba (3 cases and 2 deaths), La Paz (15 cases and 15 deaths), and Santa Cruz (65 cases and 35 deaths). Brazil reported a total of two cases of yellow fever and two deaths from Pará State. Ecuador reported a total of two cases of yellow fever and two deaths from Morona Santiago (2 cases and 2 deaths), Napo (9 cases and 5 deaths), Pastaza (4 cases and 3 deaths), and Zamora Chinchipe (4 cases and no deaths). In the United States of America, 6 cases of plague have been reported, from the State of Arizona (one case), Colorado (two cases), New Mexico (one case) and Utah (two cases). For information on reported cholera cases and deaths, see article on cholera situation in this Bulletin.