

CLOSING PLENARY ADDRESS AT ICCH 11

by IUCH President George Conway

M

y dear colleagues, it has indeed been a pleasure to share this Millennium Congress with each of you!

Uvazhamye kollegi, mne bylo ochen priyatno privetstvovat vas na nashem kongresse.

Dr. Børge Ytterstad and his Harstad colleagues have done an extraordinary job of pulling together this Congress. In addition to a well-organized scientific program, the cultural program was extraordinary and eye-opening. The biggest surprise in a week of surprises was the consummate musicianship shown by the many different performers we heard this week, including each of the local people who played. To have so many highly able musicians in such a small community is indeed remarkable. The cultural sensibilities and aesthetic sense in this Congress have indeed set a new standard, one which will be hard to match in the future. Now is the time for us to reflect a bit on this week. To assist in this, I will summarize some of the week's highpoints.

In the Congress opening, Leif Arne Hansen, Governor of Tromsø County, exhorted us to make sense of people's needs in the North, and consider how best to use available resources.

D.A. Henderson started off the scientific program with an historical perspective on infectious diseases and an admonition to be cautious about emerging agents and bioweapons. The well-attended infectious disease general sessions served as a pointed reminder that microbial threats continue to be an important concern to health professionals and to the peoples of the circumpolar region. Respiratory diseases in particular pose a special problem, as was highlighted by papers on tuberculosis, respiratory syncytial virus, influenza, pneumococcal disease and the role of molds in domestic housing. New and emerging infections can be expected to provide both new challenges and new opportunities.

Rapidly changing social conditions point to an ever expanding array of new microbial threats. Such conditions include exponen-

tial increases in urban populations; burgeoning international travel; the industrialization and internationalization of the food supply; and the growth of hospitals which, if not scrupulously supervised, serve as an amplifier for the spread of infection. Within the past two decades, the world has witnessed the emergence of HIV-AIDS as a global pandemic. As was pointed out in the opening plenary session, near-catastrophic epidemics of plague and smallpox have occurred in the past and there is no a priori reason to believe that such events might not occur again. The circumpolar regions are not exempt from this danger, having documented destructive and recurrent epidemics of smallpox, influenza, tuberculosis and other diseases.

There is a need to be better prepared for coping with these problems. The foundation for such a defense rests with a strong and effective surveillance system which can detect and diagnose problems at the earliest possible time; an effective public health infrastructure to provide urgently the needed care, vaccines, drugs and other control measures; and a research capacity able to better define the problem and to develop needed responses. Plans for a circumpolar surveillance program were explored at the meeting; the components and challenges of a rapid response team in Manitoba Canada were described; and new research methods for defining the virulence of different organisms were reported by scientists from the VECTOR Laboratory in Novosibirsk, Russia.

Needed measures to deal with new and emergent microbial diseases will serve, as well, to provide for protection against a newly perceived and especially worrisome threat – the possible release of microorganisms as an act of bioterrorism

Dealing effectively with a bioterrorist attack will be difficult at best. Thus, preventive measures deserve priority to assure, to the extent possible, that it will not take place. A strengthened Biological Weapons Convention prohibiting the development or production of biological weapons is one step. Second is the need for a global consensus among health personnel, scientists and politicians that any such activities would represent one of the most serious of crimes against humanity, deserving of the severest punishment. A third step, unanimously agreed upon by the World Health Assembly, provides for the destruction of all stocks of smallpox virus, the most threatening of all the potential biological weapons, by December 2002. Each of these measures deserves our approbation and support.

At the other concurrent sessions throughout the week, tangible threads ran throughout: the hazards of modern life and rapid development and the need for improved health promotion services – from encouraging exercise as an antidote to the modern

sedentary lifestyle, to the dangers of tobacco and progress made in stemming its use. We heard of recent behavioral and risk surveys and what they portend for our youth. We also heard much good news, such as the new connectivity to services and information provided by telemedicine and Internet access, and the real progress made in curbing tobacco's use in many settings. Leif Svanstrom gave us a helpful tour of the World Health Organization's remarkable Safe Communities Program and website. The injury tracks which followed were quite comprehensive, with details on drownings, bear maulings, snowmachine (snowmobile) injuries, frostbite, and hypothermia, as well as surprisingly thorough treatments of the physiology of cold adaptation and injury. There were also a number of very challenging papers about suicide, alcohol, and drug addiction, recurring themes in the North. Robert Beaglehole reminded us of the need to have a broad vision for public health, and demonstrated some of the benefits of economic development, while warning of the dangers of globalization of industry and services. He reminded us of the fragility of progress, providing as a case the sharp decrement in male life expectancy in Russian males during the last decade and the displacement and chaos caused by wars in the former Yugoslavia. His other large message was about the impact that modern, urban/industrial life has on humans – heart disease, malignancies, and other conditions “transmitted” by the sedentary lifestyle and commercial products like cigarettes. These points were echoed in many of the concurrent sessions, as well.

Ole Henrik Magga reminded us that self-determination is not yet universal among circumpolar indigenous people. Two extraordinary concurrent sessions on traditional medicine, self-determination, and disease pattern alteration in circumpolar indigenous people shed light on persistent problems, while revealing much hope and progress as well. Harriet Kuhnlein convincingly demonstrated that the question of which foods to eat and when is a complex one, with the need to balance the threat of industrial contaminants in foods with the risk of turning one's back on one's own culture and familiar, nutritious foods.

Peter Bjerregaard provided an historical and conceptual tour-de-force of the interaction of social change and health, reflecting on a common theme throughout the indigenous program, the cardiovascular sessions, and the sessions on living in the Arctic.

Rita Blumenstein very gently showed us the power of some forms of traditional healing by indigenous people, reaching deep within us with her songs and drumming.

We also saw very convincing demonstrations of how telemedicine has matured from a curiosity to an essential tool in providing medical services in remote and sparsely-populated areas.

The working groups had their own conclusions:

The Birth defects/fetal alcohol syndrome WG agreed that uniformity in surveillance and reporting are critically needed, along with early intervention and increasing public awareness of the hazards of pregnant women drinking.

The HIV/STD WG cited a persistent sporadic pattern of infection in rural areas, the continuing role of injection drug use in transmission, and the balance between the hope brought by ready and wide access to medications in the West, and the persistence of risky behaviors and spread of the disease in less developed and economically disadvantaged areas.

The women's health workgroup reached consensus on four major points, and asks our assistance in: 1) providing more direction for the research agendas of Arctic nations to focus on women's health, particularly that of indigenous women; 2) increasing awareness throughout the IUCH of the role that women's well-being plays in assuring the health and overall well-being of families and communities throughout the Arctic; 3) providing a mechanism for sharing of information and findings from women's health research; and 4) increasing the visibility of women within the IUCH, and elevating the issues identified by them.

And, finally, the injury prevention working group decided that snowmobiles may be the most compelling emerging injury hazard, and agreed to some international collaborative work to better understand and prevent these events.

So, can we synthesize all of these many parts into some meaningful whole? My crude formulation would be that we are all struggling with how to adapt to and mitigate the damage of rapid development and social and environmental change, and how the special environment in the circumpolar regions adds new and additional wrinkles to this. One of the up sides in this equation is the new ease with which we can communicate and collaborate, through the Internet, e-mail, and other recent tools.

Can we see clearly what to do with all that we have learned? While we must each work largely within one or two disciplines, it will do us well to know our neighbors, both physical and conceptual.

In a recent essay, physicist Steven Weinberg describes five utopias which various groups of humans still envision: the free-market utopia, the best-and-brightest utopia, the religious utopia, the green utopia, and the technological utopia, with his opinions of the obvious advantages but inevitable pitfalls of each. He goes on to describe his own conception of a "half-utopia", the "civilized egalitarian capitalist utopia" wherein: production remains in the hands of competing private corporations, overseen by a democratic government that is itself overseen by independent courts; these corporations continue to use high salaries along with status

and authority to attract workers and managers with special talents, and dividends to attract capital. Those who receive a high income are able to keep only some of it; to prevent the rest of their income from being simply taken in taxes, they give much of it to museums, universities, and other institutions of their choice, reaping benefits that range from moral satisfaction to better seats at the opera. These nonprofit institutions use the donations to invest in business enterprises, eventually replacing wealth individuals as the owners of industrial corporations. Of course, with this, Weinberg is only projecting forward a number of current trends, those which have already expanded the role of non-governmental, non-profit organizations such as our own greatly through the last decade. Globalization will also increase the need and utility of trans-national efforts such as our own.

Weinberg concludes his lengthy essay with an admonition: "I don't offer this modest utopia with any great fervor, because I have doubts whether men and women will be content with an individualistic life of love and work and liberty and equality. People have seemed also to need some exciting collective enterprise that, even if destructive, would lift them out of the everyday round of civilized life." It struck me in reading this that we here are all indeed fortunate to be involved in such an exciting collective enterprise, and a constructive one at that.

This week, we have had a real opportunity to update our knowledge and skills and to discuss many challenging health problems. While the good news we heard included the development of new vaccines and better deployment of old ones, and the extraordinary increase in self-determination and cultural revitalization among the indigenous peoples in much of the Circumpolar region, much remains to be done.

Of course, the main reason we all gathered here was to meet, visit, and collaborate with each other, as we are all indeed fortunate to work with the common goal of making life healthier and happier throughout the Circumpolar regions of the Earth. I know that I will continue to cherish each new acquaintance I made this week, as well as each old one I was able to renew.

I hope that each of you have had a productive and pleasurable week.

Thank you!

Ya nadeyus shto u vas bylo nasyshennaya nedelya, i vy khorosho proveli vremya. Spazebol!

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