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IHD Labs
History
(1928)

Memorandum Concerning Future Developments
in the International Health Division of
The Rockefeller Foundation.

This must be 1928

because
report
referred
to is
DR 374
Presented
to Trustees
in November
1928

Identification
is made
certain
by
quotation
beginning
"much of
etc."

In January of this year the "Divisional Committee for the International Health Division" made a report to the Rockefeller Foundation on the "Activities of the I.H.D. and Recommendations as to the Future Status of this Division." In this report attention was drawn to the fact that "much of the work undertaken or in prospect is of a technical, scientific character," and the recommendation was made that a board of scientific men should be organized, which "could, along with the director, deal comprehensively with all the many and varied activities on which the Division is at present engaged, or which may arise for consideration in the future." It was further recommended that it should be the policy in the future "to promote intensive rather than extensive operations."

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The implication of these recommendations seems to be that it is desirable, without radically modifying the field of activities of the Division, gradually to increase the attention given to the scientific and fundamental aspects of the work.

The extraordinary accomplishments of the Division in the past are alluded to in the report of the Divisional Committee. It is not believed, however, that the Trustees feel that the limit of usefulness has been reached, or that no modification in policy which would work to the advantage of the Division can be made. The fact that the Divisional Committee was appointed is evidence that the contrary opinion was in the minds of the Trustees.

At the present time the work of the I.H.D. is conducted along

several lines.

I. The Division attempts to improve the professional education of public health workers, chiefly by supporting fellowships.

II. It offers advice to public health agencies with the object of improving the service rendered, and it attempts to stimulate Public Health officials by offering facilities for travel.

III. It gives financial and other assistance to State and local health organizations in order that changes in methods of administration that are believed to be advantageous may be made. This activity at present requires a considerable share of the financial resources of the Division.

IV. It carries on activities designed to combat the occurrence and spread of certain specific diseases. These diseases at present are hookworm disease, yellow fever, malaria, and to a lesser extent tuberculosis and acute respiratory disease.

Historically the last named line of activity came first. Out of the efforts to combat hookworm disease developed the second and third lines of activity which are intended to improve the governmental administrative control of public health.

In developing the first three lines of endeavor there has been enlisted a large staff of workers, the majority of whom are either engaged in the administrative work of the Division itself, or acting--or attempting to act--in an advisory capacity to those controlling governmental health agencies. A considerably smaller number of the staff members are employed in carrying on the fourth line of activity of the Division, the prevention of certain diseases. It can be seriously questioned

whether the workers comprising the former and larger group are being stimulated to think deeply of the concrete problems of preventive medicine in contra-distinction to the problems of organization and administration. The men engaged in the work concerning the control of the specific diseases mentioned are in certain instances well trained in scientific methods but, due to the emphasis laid on administrative control, some of them, at least, have lost their contact with the scientific aspects of the problems involved. The question arises whether many of the men of either group are developing along lines which justify their acting as experts, or acting in an advisory capacity to those who are responsible for the practice of preventive medicine in the future. The prevention of disease is dependent on much more than proper organization of governmental agencies. To the small number of members of the staff who have retained the inquiring mind, the facilities offered have been inadequate. The writer believes that at the present time it is especially important that public health activities be conducted along lines that have a sound scientific basis and rest not merely on the opinions of those engaged in public health administration. The present wide-spread interest in preventive medicine may easily be turned into skepticism and distrust if continued attempts are made to introduce measures that are not sound.

It seems, therefore, that one of the chief duties of those responsible for the I.H.D. is to attempt to permeate the staff with a scientific attitude of mind, that is, with the spirit of inquiry and desire to increase knowledge. The second is to give opportunities to those workers of ability who can add to the store of knowledge relating to preventive medicine, either as concerns specific diseases and their control

or as relates to the broader aspects of public health. In the writer's opinion the present organization of the I.H.D. with the very great emphasis laid on methods of administrative control is not ideal. The practitioner of medicine or surgery becomes stale unless he is personally keenly interested in definite fundamental problems relating to his own subject, and to the solution of which he is giving thought and attention. This is certainly true of those who assume to be leaders. If this is true in curative medicine it is no less true in preventive medicine, in which field the members of the staff of the I.H.D. are assumed to be leaders. Moreover, if the I.H.D. is to make the greatest progress in the prevention of the diseases in which it has become especially interested, the methods for the prevention of which are not well established, it is bound to take steps to investigate these diseases, and the nature of their spread, with the best modern scientific methods.

This principle is now well established, even in business. The American Telephone and Telegraph Company, the largest business corporation in the country, does not devote all its energies to building lines and renting telephones. A very considerable part of its expenditures goes into research, even into the investigation of problems of no immediate obvious practical application. That the I.H.D., the largest private agency in the world dealing with preventive medicine, has no organized research department of its own seems significant. This does not mean that no research has been undertaken in the past or no important results obtained. The recent outstanding discoveries in yellow fever are sufficient refutation of that interpretation. But these results have been obtained in spite

of unsatisfactory conditions and at an unnecessarily large expense.

It has been suggested that the solution of the problems which arise in connection with the work of the I.H.D. might be accomplished by employing special workers in this or that university. In certain instances this method has already been advantageously employed, and the practice may be continued. But in order to preserve and to develop the inquiring attitude of mind in the workers of the staff of the I.H.D., from the highest to the lowest, it is essential that investigation should be carried on within the organization itself and comprise an important part of its activities. The staff of the I.H.D. is supposed to be composed of scientific men. Every effort must be made to keep them such. It is not for nothing that the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, the General Electric Company, and numerous other similar institutions attempt to solve their problems within their own organizations, when they also might farm out their problems to different universities and institutions.

This does not mean that every member of the staff of the I.H.D. should be engaged in laboratory work. The great majority of problems in public health cannot be solved within conventional laboratory walls. But for some of the problems laboratories in the ordinary sense are essential. Moreover, contact with the exact methods employed in the laboratories exerts an important influence on work carried on under less well controlled conditions. With the multifarious contacts of the I.H.D. with public health agencies throughout the world, and the confidence with which these agencies now regard the I.H.D., an extraordinary opportunity exists for

the scientific investigation of the epidemiology of diseases under a great variety of conditions. Advantage can only be taken of this opportunity if the organization becomes permeated with an attitude of inquiry.

Furthermore, in order to bring about an altered attitude of mind certain changes in the staff will be required. The addition of a few men of proved scientific attainments is urgently needed. It is obvious that these men must be provided with a place in which to work when they are not in the field. It is believed that these men would act as a leaven for the whole organization. Members of the staff returning from the field would come to these men for advice and assistance on their own problems. They themselves would have the opportunity of working for longer or shorter times in this scientific atmosphere before returning to their field work. Certain members of the present staff have scientific ability and inquiring minds; others will acquire these qualities. There are other members who must remain in purely administrative positions. There are some who may not be comfortable in the changed atmosphere.

It is not proposed, however, that any radical or revolutionary changes be made in methods or procedures. What is needed is a somewhat less wide dispersal of the activities of the Division, an increased emphasis to be laid on the importance of research both in the field and in the laboratory, and an attempt to cultivate the spirit of investigation in the members of the staff.

If such a development of the I.H.D. should occur, it is believed that this organization could take a real leadership in public health work throughout the world. Its functions would not be merely to offer advice

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and great financial aid to existing institutions, or to stimulate the adoption of a better type of governmental machinery, but it is believed that it then would be able to direct the evolution of preventive medicine along the most sound and successful lines.