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Homage to Andrija Stampar

Andrija Stampar (1888–1958) was one of the founders of the World Health Organization, Chairman of the Interim Commission, and President of the First World Health Assembly. His name is a byword to all students of public health and is familiar to readers of World Health Forum from our fortieth anniversary article about the early days of WHO (1) and the reminiscences of Szeming Sze (2).

I had the privilege of having worked closely with Professor Stampar. He was an inspiration to all who knew him. His vision of health as being more than merely the absence of disease is embodied in WHO’s Constitution; his concept of positive health as humanity’s ideal will perhaps stand for ever.

Man of action

But more than an idealist, Stampar was a man of action. He insisted that no difficult situation or condition should prevent one from taking action. After completing his medical studies in Vienna he returned home to work in Croatia and became acquainted with the health problems of rural populations. It was the time of the First World War, and health conditions were far from satisfactory. They called for energetic action, and Stampar performed outstanding work, particularly in organizing campaigns against epidemic diseases.

As a young man after the First World War, he became Director of Public Health in Yugoslavia and laid the foundations of a health system which reflected his advanced ideas on the preventive and social aspects of the protection of the health of the community. He created and organized a network of health services with health centres as the basic field units. With the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, he was able to establish the School of Public Health at Zagreb, which, in the course of time, became a postgraduate medical training centre for the whole country, bearing his name, and in which particular emphasis is laid on specialized training in social medicine and hygiene.

Stampar began his dynamic and distinguished career in the international health field as early as 1924, first as a member of various commissions and committees of the Health Organisation of the League of Nations, and later as a member of the Health Committee of the League. In 1931 he left the Ministry of Health to become Professor of Hygiene and Social Medicine at the University of Zagreb.

His international work was already leading him to think in terms of a world health
organization. As well as lecturing on hygiene and social medicine as visiting professor at universities and health institutes in several European countries, he spent three years assigned by the League of Nations to work on the organization of public health services in China, and made a valuable contribution to the development of public health administration in that country. He also worked at the League of Nations headquarters in Geneva, where he devoted himself mainly to the problems of organization of schools of public health in the European countries and of maternal and child health services.

Stampar considered his concepts and ideas as generators of action rather than as goals in themselves. He was always in search of ways to translate scientific achievements and ideas into practice for health benefits to all. Indeed, our modern aim of health for all was voiced, as far back as 1948, in his presidential address to the First World Health Assembly as follows: “Since health for everyone is a fundamental human right the community should be obliged to afford all its peoples health protection as complete as possible” (3).

Logic of common sense

In these days of abundant scientific discoveries, I think he would be less perplexed than most of us as to how to meet rapidly growing needs and expectations with limited resources. He was a master in the art of recognizing where priorities lay. This was perhaps the reason for the successful outcome of his projects, because in selecting priorities he followed principles that could be summed up simply as common sense: the expression of his inborn logic. His logic was so convincing that no one could resist it. This, added to his other capabilities and characteristics, made him a leader of outstanding charisma. Professor Stampar was straightforward and sincere. He was a man of integrity, loyal to his ideas and to all those who worked with him, so his followers had infinite trust in him.

Stampar himself, being a man of action, did not feel the need to talk about his logic which was simple and natural to him. However, in trying to present his thinking in a schematic way to my students, I evolved certain algorithms that I call “Stampar’s axioms”. For example, man’s basic human right is health, therefore a health worker’s duty is to see to the fulfilment of this right. Starting from this simple formula, other levels of rights and duties are deduced: the rights of populations and duties of government and, ultimately, on a global level, the rights of humanity and the responsibilities of the United Nations and WHO. However, rights and duties work both ways, and Stampar used to emphasize this: if a health worker’s duty is to educate the people in how to safeguard their health, then an individual’s duty is to learn how to preserve and improve his health.

With these axioms in mind any situation — however complex it might appear — can be dealt with logically. Priorities can, of course, be determined by statistical analyses and scientific consideration. But Stampar believed that abstract evaluation alone was not enough. He was fond of saying that however poor and illiterate people may be, they will always be aware of their own problems, and nothing could take the place of open-minded discussions with them in
their own surroundings. When he received the Léon Bernard Foundation Prize and Medal at the Eighth World Health Assembly in 1955, he said: "As a medical student I lived in a small village of some hundreds of inhabitants, who toiled at their land to earn their living. This people was my first and best teacher. I learnt from them to look upon life realistically, and they first made me think of innumerable factors connected with so many fields of human activities which influence health" (4).

International health cooperation

After a priority problem has been identified, and given the interest and motivation of the population to cooperate, financial and logistical matters remain to be solved. Stampar believed that funds must always be made available for sound health programmes. All too often, though, this was not the case. Nevertheless, he did not see financial constraints as a reason to abandon programmes but only to scale them in time and range of action in accordance with resources.

Stampar recognized that constraints placed on international health efforts were not only financial, and he rebuked fellow-delegates at the Health Assemblies who tried to introduce political disputes into WHO. He pointed to the constitutional obligations of the Organization to work for health and well-being, and insisted that WHO was not an appropriate place for political speeches. He intervened several times on this account, and it is in no small measure due to him that WHO has been able to continue its professional work in all corners of the globe.

I am sure that Stampar, as a fighter for human rights, would be happy to see that peaceful transformations are taking place in eastern Europe. He would certainly have been in the forefront of action and I believe he would have proposed that funds saved by disarmament be added to resources to aid areas stricken by war and hunger. He would probably have taken advantage of the tremendous power released by the popular movements in eastern Europe to urge the new governments to include in their programmes the improvement of health services, nutrition and health education. Even before the First World War, he said that it was already getting more and more evident that medicine ought to be entirely at the service of the people. "The health of a nation was not only the task of a physician, but of the nation as a whole" (4).

Stampar realized that the field of international public health transcended the health of separate nations and required cooperation. Through his acquaintance with many foreign countries he became conscious of how economic and cultural conditions influenced human health and of the truth of social medicine's premise that dealing with health problems was by no means the domain of the physician only. He became convinced that social medicine could only be successful on the basis of collective work by a team of engineers, chemists, educators, agriculturists, veterinary scientists, nurses, and other technical staff. He also emphasized that experience obtained in one country could not be transferred and applied to another without thinking out afresh, seriously and thoroughly, every problem and
Andrija Stampar was born at Drenovac, Croatia, on 1 September 1888. He obtained his medical degree at the University of Vienna in December 1911. From 1912 to 1913 he worked as hospital physician at Karlovac, and from 1913 to 1918 as district physician at Nova Gradiška. At the end of the war, in 1918, he was appointed medical adviser to the provisional government at Zagreb. In 1919 he was appointed Director of Public Health in the Ministry of Health in Belgrade, in the newly created Yugoslavia. He established the School of Public Health at Zagreb.

In May 1931, on leaving the Ministry of Health, he was elected Professor of Hygiene and Social Medicine in the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Zagreb, his appointment eventually being confirmed by the government.

In 1931 he took active part in the European Conference on Rural Hygiene.

From 1933 to 1937 he worked with the League of Nations, spending three years in China on the organization of public health services followed by a year at the League’s headquarters in Geneva.

At the end of 1937 he gave a number of lectures in the USA and in 1938 he was appointed Rosenberg Professor at the University of California. At the outbreak of the Second World War he returned to Yugoslavia and resumed his post at the University of Zagreb, where he was elected Dean of the Medical Faculty the following year.

In 1945 he attended the meetings of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs as a member of the Yugoslav Delegation, and in 1946 the Conference of the United Nations in London, where he was elected the first Vice-President of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and was appointed a member of the Technical Preparatory Committee for the creation of the World Health Organization. He was elected Chairman of the Interim Commission, which assumed the responsibilities of the future World Health Organization pending the entry into effect of its Constitution.

In February 1947 Stampar became a member of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts at Zagreb, the most important scientific institution in the country; in March of the same year he was elected its President. He founded the Institute of Industrial Hygiene at Zagreb, the first institution of its kind in Yugoslavia.

In July 1948 he was elected President of the First World Health Assembly in Geneva. He attended the First World Conference on Medical Education in London in 1953.

Professor Stampar was recipient of the Léon Bernard Foundation Prize and Medal in 1955. He was an honorary member of the Public Health Association of the USA, an honorary member of the Academy of Medicine in New York, and a corresponding member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences at Belgrade and the Slovenian Academy of Sciences at Ljubljana. He was the author of several books.


every question in terms of history, socioeconomic structure, customs, psychology and all other environmental factors decisive in the formation of human beings (4).

Sometimes, in private conversation, he would talk of possible future technological developments. He was not a dreamer, and it was not in his character to wander into the
realm of science fiction, but he was a man of great imagination. He considered a lack of imagination to be a most regrettable defect of his fellow-men, since imagination heralds creativity. He made an enlightening remark when being shown round a modern laboratory in a prestigious medical school: “You are excellently equipped with microscopes, but I think most of all you need a telescope.” In other words, let us see the problem as a whole, and keep the global view in mind even while working on a mass of details. This might be one of the greatest challenges for modern health workers. He repeatedly said that diseases do not recognize territorial borders, and therefore every health worker is ultimately part of a global international effort for better health.

Witnessing the rapid progress of science, Stampar would perhaps emphasize refresher training: he was an avid promoter of continuous training. He would point to many areas where reforms and changes were needed and would promote international exchange of experience. In spite of his high esteem for technology, I believe that he would warn us not to become its slaves, and would urge us not to dehumanize health care in the name of good management.

Stampar said that physicians should devote more time to studying and to teaching the people. Himself an ardent teetotaller, he believed that his own life-style reflected an essential part of his teaching, with a major influence on health education programmes. His concept of positive health is aptly illustrated by current drives for smoke-free environments. Indeed, studies on health effects of life-styles were stimulated by the idea of positive health: public awareness of individual responsibility has led to campaigns for healthy cities and to the growing ecological movement for conservation of our planet.

Andrija Stampar was certainly one of the great pioneers for health. He saw WHO in a leadership role, even wider than the health field, when he said at the First World Health Assembly, “If we proceed in this way, the World Health Organization may well become a powerful pioneer of world peace and understanding among nations”. □

References


