



REGIONAL COMMITTEE

SEA/RC16/5

Sixteenth Session

21 June 1963

Provisional Agenda item 7

RADIATION PROTECTION AND THE NATIONAL HEALTH AUTHORITY

The Thirteenth World Health Assembly gave detailed consideration to the subject of "Radiation health, including protection of mankind from ionizing radiation hazards, whatever their source", and requested, among other things, that in WHO's activities in radiation health the Director-General "place special emphasis upon the teaching and training of technical personnel within the Member Countries and on encouraging and assisting the health authorities in these countries to accept their major role and accelerate their activities in the public health aspects of radiation from all sources" (see resolution WHA13.56).

A WHO Expert Committee on Radiation met in September 1962, in Geneva. This Committee recommended:

- "(1) that health agencies recognize their fundamental responsibility for protection of the public health against the hazards arising from all sources of ionizing radiation;
- (2) that health agencies initiate programmes to meet this responsibility, and
- (3) that the authority of the health agency include broad discretion and flexibility in the establishment of a programme of control of radiation sources."¹

WHO is encouraging and supporting the development of measures for radiation protection throughout this Region (see Fifteenth Annual Report of the Regional Director, Part I, Section 6.10).

¹"Public Health Responsibilities in Radiation Protection",
Fourth Report of the Expert Committee on Radiation,
WHO Tech. Rep. Ser. 254 (Geneva, 1963), p.23

1. Importance of Radiation

Radiation protection is now assuming much more importance, with the increasing use of radiology in medicine, both in diagnosis and therapy, the increasing amounts of radioactive isotopes becoming available for use in medicine, industry, agriculture and basic scientific research, and the possible effect of fall-out from atomic explosions and from construction of nuclear reactors and power plants. Although there has been, in some areas, an increase in radioactive fall-out, this has formed, on the average, only a very small percentage of the radiation to which the public is exposed. While natural background radiation from outer space and the environment gives the greatest exposure to the whole population, the diagnostic use of x-rays makes the largest single contribution to exposure from man-made sources of radiation. On the other hand, many of the advances recorded in modern medicine, in diagnosis, therapy and research, would not have been possible without ionizing radiation.

2. Public Health Responsibility

The national health authority has a responsibility for the protection of the public health against the hazards arising from all sources of radiation. Although atomic energy authorities have obvious responsibilities for safety measures in nuclear installations, the problems of radioactive waste disposal and atomic accidents, where they may affect the public health, become matters for national health authorities, as do also the promotion and establishment of departments for the medical uses of radioisotopes, the setting up of radiotherapy departments and the installation of modern supervoltage equipment - all clearly in the medical field.

An efficient system of protection should be developed based on sound protection standards, on which there is international agreement. The total public health responsibility might include; control and regulation of the possession and use of irradiating apparatus and radioactive substances by licensing or registration; the supervision and inspection of installations and departments in which they are used; the measurement and control of radiation exposure of radiation workers and the general population; assessment of possible atmospheric, water and food contamination with radioactive materials, and the notification and management of radiation accidents. It is advisable that the health agency establish co-operation and co-ordination with the activities of other governmental agencies, notably the atomic energy authority and probably others, such as those of labour, industry and transport.