

Forum Interview



with Szeming Sze

WHO: from small beginnings

Dr Szeming Sze, who was a member of the Chinese delegation to the conference convened to draft the Charter of the United Nations in 1945, takes a look back to the days when WHO began. He tells **World Health Forum** what life was like behind the scenes and how the idea became reality.

Dr Sze, you are one of the “founding fathers” of the World Health Organization. Can you tell us something about what happened during the United Nations Conference on International Organization held in San Francisco in 1945, where the idea was born?

Well, it came about quite accidentally. The San Francisco Conference was being held so that countries could pledge themselves to establish the United Nations, and nobody had any thought at the start of the Conference of forming a health organization. However, there were two medical men there besides myself: Dr Karl Evang of Norway and Dr Geraldo de Paula Souza of Brazil. As far as I know, there were no doctors in the French, Russian, United Kingdom, or United States delegations. So one day the three of us had what you might call a “medical lunch” together.

What date was that?

I am not sure exactly, but it must have been about 2 May 1945. Karl Evang, of course, was the most active of the three of us. He said, “Why don’t we start a new health organization?” I was a little sceptical because we had been asked to go to San Francisco to draw up the Charter for the United Nations, and I knew that there had been no thought beforehand of setting up a health organization. But Evang was so enthusiastic, as was his nature, that all three of us became keen to start something.

Now, as you know, China was one of the four sponsors of the San Francisco Conference, along with the UK, USA and USSR; so Dr Evang and Dr Souza thought the Chinese delegation should take the lead in making the proposal. Fortunately it was

rather easy for me to help things along because I was there as the private secretary of the head of our delegation — not in any medical capacity, but because I could write his speeches in English. I merely spoke to my boss and he said, “Yes, go ahead” — just like that. So the first hurdle was easily surmounted. If I had not been working for him it would have taken weeks to have gone through all the different committees and procedures that just our delegation alone would have required. Almost before I realized what was happening, I was landed with the job of presenting a proposal to the San Francisco Conference that we should set up a single health organization.

Why do you say “single health organization”?

Let us cast our minds back to 1945. At that time there were a number of pre-existing health organizations: the Office International d’Hygiène Publique (OIHP), which had been set up by the International Sanitary Conventions and had been operating since 1907; the League of Nations Health Organisation created after the First World War; and the Health Division of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), which was

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dealing with health activities in the aftermath of the Second World War. In addition, there were regional organizations like the Pan American Sanitary Bureau and the Egyptian Sanitary, Maritime and Quarantine Board. So it became a matter of

Szeming Sze

Dr Szeming Sze, born in Tianjin, China, in 1908, graduated from Cambridge University in 1928 and St Thomas’s Hospital Medical School, London, in 1932. He was General Secretary of the Chinese Medical Association from 1937 to 1941. He took a special interest in health education and in 1937 he founded the Health League of China. In 1938 he was appointed Senior Technical Expert of the National Health Administration. His 1941–45 war service included secondment to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and in this context he attended the San Francisco Conference in 1945. In 1948 he joined the Secretariat of the United Nations in New York, where he became Medical Director in 1954. After retirement in 1968 Dr Sze created the LISZ Foundation which, among other things, supports WHO’s work in health education; his address is 1147 Hillsboro Mile, Apt. 608, Hillsboro Beach, FL 33062, USA.



trying to tidy up the situation and of pulling all these disparate organizations into a single entity. That was our first aim. However, so as not to get tied up in practical politics we had to agree among ourselves how to present the proposal.

So the procedural roundabouts had already started in 1945?

Yes, indeed. At first we thought the simplest way would be to propose a resolution asking the Conference to draw attention to the situation and to convene another conference in order to set up a single world health organization. But after a week or so the Steering Committee (made up of the four sponsoring countries) said that the Conference had too many draft resolutions to deal with, and delegations were asked not to submit any more.

We were disappointed at not being able to present our resolution, and Dr Souza said,

“Why don’t we try another route, by proposing that the world ‘health’ be inserted into the Charter?”

Into the United Nations Charter?

Yes. We thought that if we got the word “health” in once, there would be an obligation to set up a health organization. I was all for playing safe and getting a conference started, but I saw no harm in letting the Brazilian delegation try to have the word “health” inserted into the Charter. Rather to my surprise he succeeded. That’s why you find “health” in the United Nations Charter, but it still did not give us the conference we wanted.

With the restriction that had been announced on draft resolutions, we thought we were too late. I was just giving up hope of getting anything started when Fate took a hand: one evening at a dinner party I found myself sitting next to the Secretary-General of the Conference, Mr Alger Hiss. I asked him what we could do to provoke the attention of the Conference now that we could no longer present a resolution for its adoption. He immediately said, “Oh, it’s very simple: don’t present it as a resolution, call it a declaration.”

Did it work?

Yes, very well. We presented a recommendation for a general conference to be convened to establish an international health organization, as a joint declaration by the governments of Brazil and China, that is, the delegations of Dr Souza and myself. We had to leave out Norway because Dr Evang had been recalled following the liberation of Norway on 8 May, and he had very important work to do at home as Director-General of Public Health. Our declaration was approved unanimously by

the Conference: that was the very beginning of the World Health Organization.

Dr Evang’s departure at that time created some problems for you, I understand.

I am sorry to say it did. Karl Evang’s replacement was a social scientist who was not interested in health: he wanted to create an organization for social sciences. We had to tell him in no uncertain terms that that was not what we had in mind. However, our proposal to convene a conference to set up a health organization was approved by the Economic and Social Council in February 1946. Subsequently, as you know, the International Health Conference was held in New York from 19 June to 22 July 1946.

That was when details were worked out about what the organization should be called, how it should function, and so on?

Not entirely: much groundwork was done beforehand. Once things began to move, they went quickly. Before the Conference, a committee of experts called the Technical Preparatory Committee was set up, and had its first meeting in Paris on 18 March. During the course of 22 such meetings we drew up the draft Constitution of WHO, which was signed at the New York Conference on 22 July 1946.

I understand there was a certain amount of competition as to whether the International Health Conference should be organized in the USA or in France.

Yes, that was typical of the sort of problems we had to face — mainly political. Medically, there were no real problems. The French government and the staff of the OIHP pressed for the Conference to be held in Paris, because they wanted to ensure that

the future organization would be located there. The United States and, to a lesser extent, the UK governments did not favour that, and they proposed Atlantic City in the

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USA. My government having no strong feelings either way had to work out a compromise: we held the meetings of the Technical Preparatory Committee in Paris and the Conference itself in New York. It worked very well.

And our headquarters ended up in Geneva!

That's another story. There were a number of steps leading up to it, but what it boiled down to was that we had to decide on where the Interim Commission should be located. The Interim Commission had been set up at the New York Conference, on the proposal of the Technical Preparatory Committee, to ensure continuity of certain health work and to make all the necessary preparations, as it was clear that some time would be needed for the countries that had signed the Constitution to ratify it and allow the Organization to become operative. In fact, it took nearly two years. It was understood that the place chosen for the Commission's meetings would probably be the headquarters of the future World Health Organization. We had a number of votes on whether they should be held in Europe or in the USA. USA won by a fairly large majority. However, it was left flexible, and

the choice of the exact location was left to the Chairman of the Interim Commission, Dr Andrija Štampar of Yugoslavia. Most people thought that, in view of the vote, it would naturally be in the USA; however, as you said, we ended up in Geneva, and this was really Dr Štampar's decision. Certainly, it has been a very happy choice as far as I am concerned.

I understand that there were some discussions with Dr L. Rajchman who later became well known in UNICEF. You wrote in your book (1) that he had some misgivings about the creation of a new health organization. What was behind that?

I suppose it was natural that, as he had been director of the League of Nations Health Organisation, Dr Rajchman should have an almost paternal interest in the new organization. He was a great politician. He knew how to follow procedures that got results, and he thought the new organization would have greater influence if it were located in Europe. I think he was very much involved behind the scenes in having Europe chosen as its headquarters. Dr Rajchman was Chairman of the Executive Board of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, later known as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). At one time he wanted to build up UNICEF to be a health organization, and he worked closely with the head of the section on child health in the United States Public Health Service, Dr Martha Eliot, who later became Assistant Director-General of WHO. So Dr Rajchman was active on the fringes.

Dr Rajchman was an old "China hand", I think?

Yes, he had been head of the League of Nations Mission to China at the time of the

invasion of Manchuria. Dr Štampar had also been working in China, and so had the health representative of UNICEF and UNRRA at that time, Dr B. Borcic of Yugoslavia. So there were wheels within wheels.

Individual personalities were very much a determining factor in getting WHO started?

Well, I always said that my part in the founding of WHO was 90% diplomatic and only 10% medical. It was politics all the time.

How did you arrive at a consensus on the definition of health?

A lot of people did not think that we should define health in the Constitution of WHO. I only got involved because I found myself on the subcommittee on the preamble in the Technical Preparatory Committee. I think there were three of us—Dr Brock Chisholm from Canada (who became the first Director-General of WHO), Dr Gregorio Bermann from Argentina, and myself; it was a pleasant little group and we had some interesting academic discussions. Chisholm, being a psychiatrist, wanted to mention mental health, and I thought we should put in something that emphasized the importance of the preventive side of health. That's how we came up with the wording in the Constitution that defines health as not merely the absence of illness.

When the International Health Conference was held in New York somebody, I think it was Dr H. S. Gear of South Africa (who later became an Assistant Director-General of WHO), improved the wording but the final text is very much the same. I was very happy to collaborate with Dr Gear, who was another old friend of mine from China.

What about the emblem of WHO?

We had a discussion on emblems and flags in the Interim Commission days. I remember one or two people thought that the proposed yellow flag with the WHO logo on it was too much like the international shipping flag for quarantine, and they opposed it for that reason. But it was nevertheless adopted as a temporary emblem.

The flag was yellow?

Yes. Later, of course, it was changed to light blue, so as to have a family resemblance to the United Nations flag.

I understand that regional arrangements provoked heated debate.

Yes, that was one of the few controversial questions we had to deal with in the Interim Commission. We had to take account of the strong regional health organization that already existed in the Americas. The Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau, Dr Hugh S. Cumming, wanted to be independent of any single health organization. Well, we all concentrated our

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efforts on him. I somehow found myself in the middle again, because China was more or less neutral in this discussion, so we had to work out a compromise. We were able to come up with a formula that satisfied all

concerned and left the door open for the integration of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau into WHO; this happened later, when Dr Fred Soper took over from Dr Cumming as Director.

Can you tell us something more about the people who helped to start WHO? What sort of a man was Karl Evang?

Oh, he was a delightful person. A little rigid, perhaps, because he had been very strictly brought up by his clergyman father. He always wore black, and I thought he was rather a severe man, but we played a lot of tennis together and became great friends. He was one of the outstanding personalities in those days of WHO. He was a brilliant speaker in English and he had excellent ideas. He was always frank and honest and

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never held anything back. But it was his rigidity on certain questions, particularly his advocacy of contraception, that lost him the support of the Latin-American countries. If he had had this support, he would have been a strong candidate for the Director-Generalship of WHO.

What about the man who actually became WHO's first Director-General, Dr Brock Chisholm?

He was a very shy man, but with a good sense of humour. He operated very quietly. He had sensible ideas, and always expressed them very quietly, but somehow they always came out on top in the end. It must have been because he was a psychiatrist!

We have been talking about some far-sighted young and not-so-young men some forty years ago. Has their dream come true?

In my opinion WHO has expanded and grown way beyond my dreams. I never imagined that you could handle such a tremendous budget as there is nowadays and carry out so many programmes. WHO has grown immeasurably beyond what I had hoped.

And now you are a part of the history of WHO. Do you think we can learn from it for the future?

Of course we can all learn from history. We learn from the mistakes made if not from the successes; learning the reasons why certain things happened often saves us from making the same mistakes again.

Reference

1. **Sze, S.** *The origins of the World Health Organization: a personal memoir 1945-48.* Boca Raton, FL, LISZ Publications, 1982.