The role of the universities

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Where health is concerned, the universities are coming out of their ivory tower. Over the years they have been trying to integrate completely with society so as to become the catalyst in bringing about Health for all by the year 2000. Today, especially in the developing world, the universities are increasingly seeking a more realistic approach to the training of health workers—one which will overcome medical and health problems while making allowance for the cultural, social and economic circumstances. They are undertaking health and biomedical research aimed at revealing the best methods of solving pressing problems. And in shaking off out-of-date ideas, the medical universities are taking an ever more socially-oriented line in promoting health by participating actively in projects in the field through intersectoral cooperation and community involvement.

Even before the Alma-Ata Conference in 1978, the universities, in common with the administrative and political authorities, had recognised the realities that prevail in this last quarter of the century. Those with which we are concerned here include world progress, especially in the developing countries, which must from now on be viewed in terms of integrated social and economic development; the fact that 70 to 85 per cent of the people in that developing world live in rural areas; and the fact that, while the concept of health may vary between industrialised and developing countries, no health policy can be viable, particularly in the Third World, unless it faces the fundamental problems of education, communications, agriculture, water supplies, living conditions and inadequate financial resources. The obvious inference from this is that health problems are essentially development problems, and that the approach to any real solution must embrace a multitude of disciplines and sectors.

It is within this new context of community health that the University Centres for the Health Sciences have been set up in Yaoundé, Libreville, Bamako, Brazzaville, Bangui, Niamey and other places in developing countries with low social and economic levels. These centres have cast aside the traditional concepts of faculties of medicine, oriented towards individual and curative medicine. Instead they concentrate on preventive and community medicine, health information and education, epidemiology, communicable diseases, social medicine, hygiene and so forth.

Besides the general training programmes, these university centres stress problems of nutrition, maternal and child care, environmental health, water supplies, living conditions, communicable diseases (schistosomiasis, malaria, amoebiasis, cholera, yellow fever, trypanosomiasis, onchocerciasis, leprosy and intestinal parasites, measles and so on), ethno-sociology, psychology and health economics. This does not mean that the clinical and biological sciences are neglected, but they too are given an appropriate orientation.

Since the training offered is essentially intended for the largest and most underprivileged section of the population, the programme includes on-the-job training periods in the countryside and in the outer-city slums.

It is already evident that the Third World’s universities have realised what their role must be and, through their research work, they are making a valid contribution to the efforts to attain Health for all by the year 2000.

What is no less clear, however, is that they will not be fully effective in their teaching and research without the cooperation of the decision-making political authorities, the national and international organizations to which they look for support, and those industrialists who are ready to follow up the results of their work for the benefit of the communities. Equally essential will be the carrying out of research in multi-disciplinary teams and in the context of bilateral or multilateral cooperation between universities in all parts of the world.

Health for all is everybody’s business. The universities have taken a firm decision to play their part. Their ever more energetic activities show that they have fully engaged themselves in the struggle. Is this enough to ensure final victory? We shall know, or at least we hope we shall, in the year 2000—which is not so very far away.