1. The Twenty-fourth World Health Assembly adopted in May 1971 resolution WHA24.59 in connexion with a number of activities for the training of health manpower, to assist countries in developing their national health services. As requested by the resolution, the Director-General is reporting to the Executive Board on the progress of this work.

Paragraph 5 of the resolution called for an intensification of the "study of the criteria for assessing the equivalence of medical degrees and diplomas in different countries", and for a suggestion of "the definition of the term 'physician'". Activities in this respect have continued and are planned for 1972 and 1973, in close co-operation with UNESCO. Two groups of consultants met recently to discuss core curricula for the training of primary care physicians. Moreover, an expert committee planned for 1973 will review the programmes and content of medical education, in order to make recommendations on those essential elements which should form the core curriculum of any undergraduate course of medicine. The international acceptance of a core curriculum, and also of the definition of the term "physician" as suggested in paragraph 2 below, should greatly contribute to the establishment of the criteria for equivalence.

Due consideration is also being given to the implementation of paragraph 6 of the Assembly resolution. However, since this relates, per force, on the one hand to work now carried out in preparation for the expert committee mentioned above, and on the other hand to the study currently made by the Executive Board of the provision of medical literature to Member States, the whole matter can only be reported on at a future date.

2. Definition of the term "physician"

2.1 The Twenty-second World Health Assembly considered that "a definition of the term 'physician' should be worked out, using the methods which in the opinion of the Director-General are most appropriate for the purpose". The Twenty-fourth World Health Assembly also invited the Director-General "to suggest the definition of the term 'physician', pursuant to resolution WHA22.42, to the Twenty-fifth World Health Assembly".

The Director-General therefore requested the members of the WHO Expert Advisory Panel on Education and Training to express their views on a definition of the term "physician", and invited the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) to co-operate in the analysis of the replies received and in drawing up a definition.

2.2 The study of the replies from the WHO panel members revealed a wide spectrum of definitions in which it was possible to discern several common features that served as the basis of a draft definition which CIOMS circulated to all its member organizations for their comments.

1 Handbook of Resolutions and Decisions, 11th ed., p. 29, resolution WHA22.42.
On 1 November 1971 the Executive Secretary of CIOMS addressed to the Director-General of WHO the following text of a definition as approved by the Executive Committee of CIOMS:

"A physician is a person who after completing his secondary education, or equivalent, follows a prescribed course of medicine at a recognized (or accredited) university or medical school, at the successful completion of which, is qualified to be legally licensed (or registered) to practise medicine by the responsible body in the country, and is capable of undertaking the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of human illness at the community and individual levels by exercising independent judgement without supervision."

2.3 From the discussions which have thus far taken place in the World Health Assembly, it is apparent that the intention was to arrive at a definition that would facilitate comparison of those primary medical qualifications which enable individuals to practise medicine and assume the corresponding responsibilities. According to the CIOMS definition quoted above, the term "physician" applies to an individual holding a medical degree prior to any specialization which entitles him to practise medicine. In the United Kingdom this definition corresponds to a registered medical practitioner; in the United States of America the term "physician" is synonymous with medical doctor; in French the definition applies to "médecin", in Spanish to "médico" and in Russian to "vraž".

The qualifications of a physician are usually attested to by an academic degree. Only thereafter is he entitled to seek the right to exercise his profession; this is based on a number of conditions which vary extensively among countries from the mere submission of an accepted degree or diploma to a process entailing an examination and/or the fulfilment of a number of legal requirements.

It is the prerogative of governments and of interest to the medical profession in all countries to establish norms of medical practice to safeguard the public and secure the professional status of those admitted to practise medicine. To this end society and the profession impose standards of knowledge, competence and ethical behaviour on those they accept as physicians. Although such standards vary among countries, a substantial measure of common agreement already exists making it possible to draw up a definition embodying the basic characteristics of physicians from any country. However, only the state itself can decide whether it will, by licence or registration, authorize an individual to practise medicine in the country. This applies particularly to those physicians who have received their training in another country than the one in which they want to practise; whether foreigners or nationals, they will have to comply with the legislation of the country in which they will be exercising the profession.

2.4 In submitting to the Executive Board a suggested text of a definition of the term "physician", the Director-General has given due consideration to the definition proposed by CIOMS, as well as to the following points:

(a) although in some countries a degree or diploma may itself confer the right to practise medicine, it is necessary to distinguish between academic qualifications on the one hand, and the right to practise on the other;

(b) education and training of physicians throughout the world is received at recognized medical schools offering a prescribed course of medicine leading to the required academic qualifications;

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1 The expression "medical school" includes all higher education (or university level) institutions offering a prescribed course of medicine. The following are examples of the names that such institutions may bear and which vary from one country to another or even within countries: medical college, college of surgeons; medical institute, institute of medicine and pharmacy, institute of medicine and surgery; faculty of medicine, faculté mixte de médecine et de pharmacie, facultad de ciencias médicas, facultad de medicina y cirugía; academy of medicine, university centre for health sciences, medical university.
(c) the physician has the right to exercise the art of medicine according to the dictates of his professional conscience and of the ethical code of the medical profession.  

The following definition of the term "physician" is therefore suggested:

"A PHYSICIAN IS A PERSON WHO, HAVING BEEN DULY ADMITTED TO A RECOGNIZED MEDICAL SCHOOL, HAS SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED A PRESCRIBED COURSE OF STUDIES IN MEDICINE, HAS ACQUIRED THE ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS AND HAS FULFILLED THE REQUIREMENTS FOR OBTAINING FROM THE COMPETENT AUTHORITY THE RIGHT TO PRACTISE MEDICINE (COMPRISING PREVENTION, DIAGNOSIS, TREATMENT AND REHABILITATION) IN CONFORMITY WITH MEDICAL ETHICS AT COMMUNITY AND INDIVIDUAL LEVELS, USING INDEPENDENT JUDGEMENT".

3. The term "paramedical"

A WHO definition of a particular category of health workers does not necessarily imply its acceptance by Member States; it could nevertheless serve as a guide for governments. Difficulties in defining terms are due to the fact that a definition does not only serve to state the precise meaning of a word, but is often formulated to clarify an issue. However, the connotation of the term "paramedical", as it has appeared in several WHO publications and as it is described in an organizational study made by the Executive Board at its thirty-first session, has led to misinterpretation.

The main difficulties in respect of this term lie in the fact that the interpretation does not necessarily correspond to common usage outside the Organization, and that even within WHO it tends to associate the term "paramedical" with both "auxiliary" and "middle level" health personnel. Attempts have been made to give a generally acceptable interpretation of the term, but they have so far proved unsuccessful. From the point of view of etymology, the prefix "para" still leaves the meaning open to a number of interpretations in respect of equality or inferiority; some dictionaries describe "paramedical" as having an association with medicine, while others state that it has a secondary relation to medicine.

The Director-General wishes therefore to inform the members of the Board that, in order to avoid further misinterpretation about this term, WHO will henceforth refrain from associating the various health professions allied to medicine with the term "paramedical", and will no longer abide by the interpretation in the organizational study mentioned above.

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1 The Hippocratic Oath; national codes of medical ethics; The International Code of Medical Ethics adopted in 1949 by the General Assembly of the World Medical Association.

2 "the term 'paramedical personnel' includes all the professions allied to medicine which together make up the team of health personnel, i.e., nursing and midwifery, sanitation, dentistry, veterinary health, pharmacy, physiotherapy, statistics, microbiology, etc."