1948: a new health organization is born

The World Health Organization came into being on 7 April 1948. Its Constitution had already been approved in July 1946 when the representatives of 61 countries met at the United Nations' International Health Conference in New York. Before the new organization could exist officially, however, the Constitution had to be ratified by 26 of the 51 states that belonged to the United Nations at that time. When the 25th and 26th ratifications arrived on the same day in April 1948, WHO was born.

Of course, the 20 months between the International Health Conference and the birth of WHO were not spent waiting for letters of approval to arrive. An Interim Commission was set up in 1946 to start the work and prepare the structure of the new organization. Operating first from New York and then from Geneva, the Interim Commission began fostering the international cooperation for health that was to become the hallmark of WHO.

The first World Health Assembly met for a month from 24 June to 24 July 1948. The representatives of 53 Member States and 12 observers chose a president (Dr Andrija Stampar of Yugoslavia), appointed a Director-General (Dr Brock Chisholm of Canada), agreed on a structure of six regions with a headquarters in Geneva, chose an emblem, and cut the budget from the proposed 7 million dollars down to 5 million.

Early priorities

The Health Assembly called for special priority to be given to four concerns – malaria, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, and the need to improve the poor health of mothers and children. The importance of environmental hygiene and nutrition was also stressed and a list of 33 further topics was drawn up for WHO's attention.

The priorities of 1948 are still priorities today. Other concerns have come and gone and new problems have arisen but the four singled out by the first World Health Assembly continue to kill and debilitate millions. WHO has had many successes in combating disease and ill-health over the half-century of its existence – and some are described on other pages of this issue of World Health – but some serious health problems remain that require more than medical interventions.

The broader context of health was certainly recognized by WHO's founders. The Organization's Constitution with its definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" is as relevant today as it ever was. The WHO Constitution
The growth of international concern

The adoption of WHO’s Constitution at the International Health Conference was the culmination of a movement towards international cooperation in health that had been gaining momentum for decades, even centuries. When the city of Venice turned away ships coming from areas infected by the plague in 1348, thereby reducing infection in the city and saving lives, it started a trend towards the use of quarantine in preventing disease. As international travel and trade increased over the following centuries, disease spread more rapidly than before. Quarantine was widely used as a preventive measure, disrupting the travel and trade that many people relied on for their livelihood.

Concern for trade was the main motive behind the first International Sanitary Conference of 1851 at which 12 countries signed an international convention on quarantine for cholera, plague and yellow fever. Nine more International Sanitary Conferences followed, each with its own convention. By the second half of the 19th century it was widely recognized that only international cooperation could combat the world’s deadliest diseases effectively.

Economic development brought with it general improvements in living standards and education, reducing death rates and increasing life expectancy in Europe. Health came to be seen as an essential part of social and economic progress and even as an individual’s right. The founding of the Red Cross in 1864 symbolized the growth of concern for the health and well-being of others.

The first health agency to work on behalf of several governments was the Pan American Sanitary Bureau, founded in 1902. In 1907 it was joined by a European counterpart, the Office International d’Hygiène Publique (OIHP) based in Paris. When the League of Nations came into being after the First World War a new health organization was set up under its auspices. The new organization was intended to absorb the OIHP but some of the League’s members had not signed the treaty that established the OIHP so the two bodies continued side by side.

The League of Nations’ health organization appointed commissions of experts to give advice on controlling diseases or organizing health services, and held courses and study tours on various aspects of public health. It collected epidemiological information from governments and shared data with the OIHP. The League of Nations and its health organization were never fully international, however.

The Second World War put an end to the health organization of the League of Nations and to the OIHP. As destruction, food shortages and the numbers of displaced persons increased, the allied powers set up the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in 1943 to provide medical relief and health care to countries that had been liberated. Then at the May 1945 conference in San Francisco which founded the United Nations, the delegates of Brazil and China proposed setting up a “world health organization” as part of the UN. The proposal was approved unanimously, a preparatory committee was set up and over the course of 22 meetings in early 1946 drafted the constitution that was approved at the International Health Conference.

In the 1940s the aspirations for WHO were high, as they are today. Reflecting the post-war mood, WHO’s first Director-General Brock Chisholm commented, “Groups will not again survive at the expense of the lives of other groups. We shall survive as a human race or not at all.” There is little doubt that many people who are alive today would not have survived without the international efforts to prevent disease and promote health led by WHO. Yet for large numbers of the world’s population, life is still precarious. WHO’s first 50 years represent just a short stretch of the road to global health. The rest of the journey still lies ahead of us.