

WORLD HEALTH
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DE LA SANTÉSECOND WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLYA2/VR/1 ✓
13 June 1949

ENGLISH

✓ FIRST PLENARY MEETING

Palazzo Venezia, Rome
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Provisional Verbatim Record

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Note: This provisional record contains the originals of speeches delivered in English and the interpretations of other speeches. All speeches will be published in the final records of the Assembly in either the original or an authentic translation.

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1. ✓ FORMAL OPENING BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE FIRST WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Your Excellency, Fellow Delegates, it is my privilege, as President of the first session of the World Health Assembly, to open its second session. My first thoughts are those of gratitude to the Italian Government for having offered to our Assembly the hospitality of this ancient city, which has been not only of great importance in the history of mankind but whose medical traditions also stand very high in their antiquity and significance. They have indeed never been interrupted since Galen.

But this beautiful country was not only, together with Greece, the cradle of classical medicine. Think only of Vesalius, who laid in Padua the foundations of modern medicine; think of Ramazzini, one of the originators of the social outlook in medicine; think of Morgagni, the founder of pathologic anatomy; think of all those famous old medical schools at Salerno, Padua, Bologna and others, attracting students from far and wide. And then, fellow delegates, think of all the outstanding work accomplished in this country in the field of sanitation, right from the huge Roman aqueduct to the exemplary fight against malaria, begun by Italian scientists in the nineteenth century. A splendid example of the victories science can achieve in the fight against diseases which through centuries were sapping the vital forces of mankind. Finally, think of the agreement signed in Rome on the establishment of the International Office of Public Health in Paris.

I hope you will soon be able to proceed to the constitution of this second Assembly and then to deal successfully with the manifold and great tasks awaiting you in your agenda. I trust you will succeed in further strengthening our Organization and the foundations of international health work in general.

If I think back to June 1946 in New York, when we were drafting the Constitution of our Organization, I remember our optimistic confidence. We were conscious of building an instrument which would make it possible for the peoples to solve, in a spirit of true international co-operation, many problems which are truly global and thus make the world a better and in every respect a healthier place to live in. However, this bright vista was not to remain without shadows. The

first disappointment came when the ratifications hung fire and we had to wait for almost two years before the Organization became a permanent one. Then the tide of ratifications began to turn; during our Assembly's first session they had passed 50, and by now they have reached 62, thus making our Organization rank among those with the largest membership of all.

But the awareness of the growth of our Organization should not make us forget those shadows that have fallen upon it. There was first the acceptance of the Constitution with reservations; then the declaration by some Members that they did not consider themselves Members any more; the inadequate financial means at our disposal and the great delays with which Members are fulfilling their financial obligations. I think you will forgive me if I speak to you frankly about these matters. Many of you have known me since we started to lay the foundations of the World Health Organization. Nevertheless, I feel confident about its future, provided that we, all nations large and small, co-operate honestly and devotedly in a truly international spirit towards the achievement of the great and noble tasks set forth in the Preamble to our Constitution.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank you for the confidence shown me from the beginnings of our Organization. It has been a great honour for me to be with you and to contribute whatever I could to the progress of our undertaking.

2. ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE ITALIAN COUNCIL OF MINISTERS

The ACTING PRESIDENT: The next speaker is His Excellency Signor Alcide de Gasperi, President of the Council of Ministers.

SIGNOR DE GASPERI (Interpretation from the Italian): Mr. Chairman, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am glad to welcome you on behalf of the Italian Government, which is very happy to be able to express a cordial greeting to the distinguished scientists assembled here, among them men whose names recall great achievements in science for the well-being of humanity. We desire to express our gratitude to them and to convey our special thanks to the World Health Organization which has chosen for this international session - the second since the close of the war - our country.

We are glad to have among us those who fight against the ills which afflict humanity and we hope that Providence will give them the power and guidance to go on and to fight with determination and success against physical ills, from which moral ills so often spring.

It is also a great satisfaction to me that you have chosen Rome; we are now all working for the reconstruction of our country, but this in no way dims the spirit of universality in our country - that spirit which permeates our history, is the essence of our outlook on life and provides the basis of our hopes for the future. I am certain that through this spirit will be found among you the fullest understanding of your aims and the spirit which will best help you towards their attainment.

We also well understand the new methods which your Organization is adopting for the fight against disease. Formerly, attempts were made to arrest the spread of disease through protective barriers. Today, thanks to recent achievement and research, the evil is attacked at its source, and thus disease and epidemics are stifled at their place of origin. In this way not merely centres of infection are isolated, but the whole world is protected.

Italy, which favours Customs Union and the United States of Europe, is particularly aware that your activity is based upon a moral solidarity which facilitates the attainment of your aims.

I can assure you that we shall follow your work with unremitting interest and we hope that it will help to liberate humanity from the scourges which are the cause not only of physical but also of moral suffering.

And thus, in wishing you the greatest success in your work, I again express to you the welcome of my Government.

3. ADDRESS BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HYGIENE AND PUBLIC HEALTH,
CHIEF DELEGATE OF ITALY

The ACTING PRESIDENT: I call upon Professor Mario Cotellessa, High Commissioner for Hygiene and Public Health and Chief Delegate of Italy.

Professor COTELLESA (Translation from the Italian): Mr. President, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a great honour for me to welcome, on behalf of the Italian Public Health Administration, the World Health Assembly.

Italy is happy and proud to offer hospitality to the greatest international organization which is concerned with the most humane and the most beneficent of sciences, in the Eternal City, which for centuries ensured the union of the peoples and was the unfailing beacon of civilization.

The universality of Rome accords perfectly with this Assembly, which knows no political barrier and is only concerned with the common effort to subdue and exterminate diseases with which humanity is afflicted, and to lend the help of science wherever a cry of pain is heard or where some dreaded evil makes its presence felt.

Italy has always been profoundly conscious of the necessity of establishing effective international collaboration in the domain of health.

It was, in fact, in Rome, as long ago as the year 1907, that the International Conference was held which led to the creation of the Office International d'Hygiène Publique with its seat in Paris, which was one of the first international health organizations. It is our duty to recall today with special sympathy and admiration the extremely valuable and important work of this body. Italian experts in the various fields of health and hygiene lent their support to the Health Section of the League of Nations, which accomplished outstanding achievements in the different branches of public medicine.

The World Health Organization, which arose from the unification of the various existing bodies, has further increased the noble tasks of this international collaboration by setting before itself as its essential objective the raising of the level of the health and hygiene of all peoples and by affirming afresh the right of every human being to the supreme blessing of health and the enjoyment of life, which are the essential bases of all social progress.

These fundamental humanitarian principles, by which the Government of my country is also inspired, have found a full and enthusiastic echo in the heart of our generous people which, by showing to the world the energy and vitality of its magnificent work of reconstruction, has thus confirmed its resolve to share in the tasks which this Assembly proposes to carry out.

As High Commissioner of Hygiene and Public Health I cannot conceal my legitimate pride when I think of the road which Italy, in the course of a few years, has covered in the realm of public health. Nor can I fail to express my satisfaction at the results obtained, thanks to the generous aid of the United Nations and to the admirable sacrifice and long self-denial of the health personnel and the bodies dealing with public health.

During the difficult and dark post-war years Italy's health situation was not of the brightest. In 1944 the general death-rate was 15.9 per thousand inhabitants as against 13.4 in 1939, and the infant mortality rate in the first year of life was 102 per thousand live births.

The threat of exotic diseases was most serious: between 1944 and 1945 some 6,000 cases of smallpox were recorded; in Naples exanthematous typhus was raging and at Taranto several cases of bubonic plague appeared. It would be useful, also, to give here a few figures concerning tuberculosis: there were 208 deaths per hundred thousand inhabitants. Similarly in 1945, malaria was responsible for half a million deaths.

In the work of reconstruction, sanitary rehabilitation was rapid and decisive: long-term plans were drawn up within the framework of UNRRA to combat tuberculosis, malaria and trachoma; to re-establish the maritime health services; to import the new antibiotics, such as penicillin and streptomycin; to furnish the hospitals with the most urgent equipment they required; to allow the specialized hospitals to take in a greater number of patients, and to set up new establishments.

The tuberculosis death-rate in fact went down in 1948 to 61.5 per hundred thousand inhabitants, i.e., to a level considerably lower than that registered before the war.

Some really surprising results have been obtained in the anti-malarial campaign by means of a vast five-year plan which began in 1947, and which made it possible to spray with DDT all the Italian areas infested by malaria, thus protecting the population and bringing the morbidity down to the pre-war level.

Particular credit is due in this field to ERLAS which, created under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation, has succeeded in conquering the age-long and almost Biblical scourge of the anopheles in Sardinia, and to restore happiness to the marshy areas where death was always at work.

The general death-rate and the infant mortality rate have gone down in our time to a level previously unknown in Italy: the statistics of the past year show, for the general death rate, 10.5 per thousand inhabitants and, for the infant mortality rate (children who died before they reached the age of one), 71 per thousand live births. Even lower rates have been registered in the city of Rome, whose population has increased and become denser in a quite extraordinary manner in the course of these last few years.

That is a success which crowns the efforts of a wise and patient health policy, the technical and administrative organization of which is continuously being improved. To increase still further the effectiveness of these measures, reforms are being carried out which, by modifying and modernizing the structure of health administration and by improving its various intricate parts, will bring even to the rural populations the benefits of science, thanks to the perfect working of its many branches.

The difficulties arising from the very nature of the country are enormous; they are still further increased as a result of our slender economic resources: a small territory, which has already almost reached the full limits of its agricultural development, has to feed too large a population which is distributed unequally throughout areas with markedly different standards of living due to the very special geographical configuration which hinders the raising of the social level and adds greatly to the problems of assistance.

This state of affairs governs our sanitary and economic policy, which is designed to improve the health of the inhabited centres, many of which, unfortunately, are still without water-mains or drainage. We also propose to curb the impetuosity of the southern torrents, to reafforest our mountains and to win back step by step the land which has been burned by drought and infested by malaria, to bring the villages into close relations with one another, to create health centres where living conditions are least satisfactory, to improve a defective and inadequate network of hospitals, and to increase the number of preventoria and anti-tuberculosis sanatoria, the organization of which is still insufficient and indeed almost non-existent in many southern areas.

The items on the agenda of the Second Health Assembly indicate clearly that WHO is anxious to find a solution for the great health problems common to all the countries represented at the Assembly.

We can now welcome the appearance of an international medicine which has evolved from the old defensive methods of quarantine towards the infinitely higher objective of a state of health and wellbeing for the whole world.

Grandiose perspectives are opening to the beneficent science of life in this tormented period of history after a monstrous war exploited by technical progress for the spreading of misery and destruction.

These objectives, founded on scientific possibilities and on the co-operation of associated governments, should not seem Utopian.

The scientific possibilities of medicine are such that they permit of vast and concrete results. If, as we ardently desire, there is co-operation by all countries, we can proceed with the fullest confidence towards our desired aims.

It is in this spirit that we are to-day beginning our work, which I ardently hope will be crowned with success, so that each government may derive from it the guidance and the appropriate means of action in the field of hygiene and public health for the benefit of peoples who aspire to health and wellbeing.

In this historic palace which, on the threshold of the Capitol and the Forums of ancient Rome and in the shadow of Christianity, is crowned with the unconquerable effigy of the lion of Venice, the spirits of our great masters of the past are still living and present among us to-day.

This warm sunlight which sends its strong beams through these ancient windows is at once a guarantee and a happy augury that this Second Assembly of the World Health Organization of the United Nations, in the accomplishment of its great task and its noble mission, will bring the promise of a fairer future to a humanity still tormented by hatred and still suffering amidst ruins, and of a stronger unity in the work of civilization and peace.

THE ACTING PRESIDENT: Fellow Delegates, we are all grateful to His Excellency the President of the Italian Republic and to Their Excellencies, the Prime Minister and Members of Cabinet for finding time to attend our meeting.

Now we will adjourn our meeting for a few minutes.

The meeting adjourned at 12.10 p.m. and resumed at 12.25 p.m.

THE ACTING PRESIDENT: The English translation of Professor Cotellessa's speech will be distributed to all members. Therefore we do not now need an English interpretation of it and can proceed.

4. PROVISIONAL ACCEPTANCE OF AMENDMENTS TO THE RULES OF PROCEDURE OF THE HEALTH ASSEMBLY.

THE ACTING PRESIDENT: I must inform you that the Executive Board has proposed certain amendments to our Rules of Procedure. In the document distributed to you, Report of the Executive Board, Third Session - No. 17 of the Official Records of the World Health Organization - the amendments are printed on page 53. It is very important that the Assembly accept provisionally at this time the amended Rules of Procedure; otherwise we cannot proceed with our work. We have now only three main committees in the Assembly, and instead of six members of the General Committee elected from the floor there will be eight. Therefore I think that the Assembly will accept provisionally the amended Rules. Is there any objection to this?

The amendments to the Rules of Procedure were provisionally accepted.

5. ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE ACTING PRESIDENT.

THE ACTING PRESIDENT: I must remind all delegations that many of them have not yet presented their credentials; this must be done before the Committee on Credentials meets at 3 p.m. If some delegations are not in possession of the credentials issued by their respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs they can present the letters of their legations in Rome. Therefore I beg them to do so to-day.

Under Rule 74 of its Rules of Procedure the Assembly has to decide whether it desires daily publication of an Assembly Journal. The Journal contains the programmes of each day's meeting with the agenda, a very short account of the previous day's meetings and any other announcements. If there is no objection, I shall take it that the Assembly approves the publication of an Assembly Journal. Are there any objections?

I see there is no objection, so the Director-General will make arrangements for the publication of the Assembly Journal.

I must also again emphasize that the delegations must present their credentials or the letters issued by their legations or embassies; very few have presented proper credentials, therefore it will be extremely difficult to appoint the Nominations Committee - a very important Committee; and without a Nominations Committee it would be very difficult of course to constitute our Assembly, to elect the President and Vice-Presidents and chairmen of committees, and members of the General

Committees from the floor. Therefore please take this very seriously and present your letters and credentials as soon as possible.

We thus have to postpone the election of the Nominations Committee until this afternoon, but now I am going to propose the members of the Credentials Committee; it consists of twelve members according to our Rules of Procedure.

I propose to the Assembly that the following members of our Assembly should constitute the Credentials Committee. I will read them slowly in order to enable you to take notes:

Dominican Republic, Egypt, France, Italy, Pakistan, Philippine Republic, Poland, Portugal, Roumania, Union of South Africa, Uruguay, Venezuela.

It has, of course, been very difficult to propose members for this committee because so few credentials have yet been submitted.

Are you in agreement with my proposal, or are there any other proposals?

I see no objections to my proposal. Therefore, may I ask the members of the Credentials Committee to meet in Committee Room C at 3 p.m. precisely. The committee must first elect its Chairman and Rapporteur.

May I ask the Credentials Committee now appointed to submit its report at 4.30 p.m., and the members of the Assembly to come to the meeting at 4.30 p.m.?

The meeting is adjourned until then.

The meeting rose at 12.35 p.m.