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REPORT OF THE PAHO ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON MEDICAL RESEARCH

During the year 1980-1981, the activities of the ACMR were carried out through its subcommittees and at the 20th meeting of the full Committee, which was held in Washington, D.C., from 8 to 11 June 1981, with Dr. George Alleyne as Chairman.

The meeting was opened by Dr. H. Acuña, Director of PAHO, who stressed the importance of research in the solutions of the Region's health problems. He also referred to the research content of the strategies for meeting the goal of "Health for All by the Year 2000."

The Committee devoted the majority of its time to three topics: research on diarrheal diseases, health services research, and the status of nutrition research.

Diarrheal Diseases

The ACMR, together with other agencies, had been concerned for a long time with the problem of diarrheal diseases, and during previous years had had a subcommittee to consider the research which was necessary in this area. With the growth of the Global Diarrheal Disease Control Program, the activities of the PAHO ACMR subcommittee have been subsumed in a regional scientific working group on diarrheal diseases. This working group will be concerned mainly with the health services delivery component of the diarrheal diseases program. The major aspects of the regional program will be improvement of clinical management by wide use of oral rehydration, incorporating this into improved maternal and child care practices. Waste and environmental sanitation as well as good epidemiological surveillance are also important components of the regional program. The ACMR noted that there was no special component of the diarrheal diseases control program directed towards institution strengthening. This was in contrast with the two other WHO special programs. It was felt that the diarrheal diseases program would benefit from looking at the effectiveness of institution strengthening in the other programs before entering this field. Perhaps joint inter-program initiative in this area might be useful. In discussions on some technical aspects of the program there was debate as to the appropriate quantity of sodium to be used in rehydration solutions for malnourished

children with diarrhea. The ACMR accepted that the WHO formulation was most appropriate for general use, although there was the theoretical possibility that it might not be ideal for the occasional child with a complicated problem affecting water and electrolyte balance.

The ACMR took note of the forthcoming meeting of the Regional Scientific Working Group and asked that the report of that meeting be circulated to ACMR members. The ACMR felt that this and other regional programs could suffer from a lack of trained clinical epidemiologists and urged that efforts be made to increase the number of these specialists in the Region.

Health Services Research

Health Services Research (HSR) was again discussed at this meeting and its major component parts were agreed upon. Health services research must be seen to be action-oriented, and not only a theoretical exercise. The Committee agreed that PAHO should change its focus vis-à-vis health services research--it should be a tool for the solution of problems, not a free standing discipline. The Committee recommended that a few categorical programs should be selected and HSR introduced into these in an evaluative or operational mode instead of as a vertical isolated activity. It is critical that Member Countries appreciate the necessity of HSR as a tool for maximizing the efficiency of many of the programs of their ministries of health.

The social sciences in relation to health were discussed. The ACMR subcommittee (working group) reported on its work. The social sciences health research inventory had been augmented by additional references and would be submitted to BIREME.

The working group had devoted much of its attention to identifying the potential impact of the social sciences with respect to the control of malaria. The group had worked with an interdisciplinary and interagency group to consider:

- 1) the social and economic factors known to affect the transmission and distribution of malaria;
- 2) the acceptability of control measures; and
- 3) the organizational aspects of antimalarial programs.

The working group carried out this work in Tapachula (Mexico), Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. The group has begun to develop a conceptual and research framework for the study of the social and economic aspects of malaria, and it is possible that such a framework may be used as a basis for the study of other diseases. The ACMR accepted that this interdisciplinary model being developed for malaria could be extended to other diseases and the training necessary for this approach should be fostered in a network of nationally based centers.

Nutrition

The ACMR was concerned that there seemed to be declining interest and activity in nutrition research. The Committee heard presentations from Brazil, Colombia and Chile on the status of nutrition research in those countries. All the evidence presented confirmed the close interrelationship between nutritional status and socioeconomic conditions. However, it was impressive that even in the absence of dramatic changes in the socioeconomic status of the persons at risk, the nutritional status of the children in Chile seemed to have improved remarkably. In Chile, although there was proper emphasis on prevention, the health systems had developed certain nutrition intervention programs which included distribution of appropriate food and the establishment of recovery programs for those children who did have clinical stigmata of severe malnutrition. In addition to the service activities, there was an active program of nutrition research which had steadily become more applied or operational.

The ACMR also discussed a regional initiative on action-oriented research in nutrition and accepted the recommendations of the Working Group meeting which was held in Bogotá, Colombia, in June 1980. The ACMR felt that there was good justification for PAHO's continuing efforts in the field of nutrition-related research since there were already strong programs in the Region. There was also evidence that the scientific community had a multidisciplinary approach to these problems.

The ACMR agreed that the nutrition programs in the Region should be targeted towards children. There should also be support for training in nutrition and scientific interchange between those programs and countries which were active in this field. Although basic research was necessary, emphasis had to be placed on operational and applied research, and the ACMR accepted that nutrition education through the primary health care systems was a most important method of improving the nutrition of the population at risk.

Special Program of Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR)

The ACMR discussed regional activities in relation to the TDR. There was a firm recommendation that there should be continued efforts to stimulate interest and promote participation in the TDR program. The Region should also become increasingly involved in that part of the program relating to Chagas' disease. It is critical that all the Member Countries pay attention to this important program directed towards the control of six major tropical diseases.

Mental Health Research

The ACMR discussed the new WHO initiative in research on mental health and behavioral sciences, and requested that a study group be set up

to explore the area. This was preparatory to making a decision as to whether there should be a regional research program in this area.

Acute Respiratory Infections

Acute respiratory diseases, especially in children, are a major health problem in the Region. Respiratory diseases with diarrhea, especially when superimposed on a background of malnutrition, were the major causes of death in young children. There had been no major regional effort to tackle this problem. The ACMR recommended that a study group be set up to examine the state of research in this area and the feasibility of a regional program to solve the problem.

Cardiovascular Disease Research

In 1972 the ACMR had made recommendations for further work in this field and it was now agreed that there should be a presentation on this topic at the 21st meeting.

In accordance with its remit of advising the Director on research being done by PAHO, the ACMR reviewed the work being done by the Pan American Foot-and-Mouth Disease Center. There was strong commendation for the research program which was being undertaken and concern over some of the problems which the Center was experiencing in funding. The Director of PAHO suggested that some members of the ACMR might be invited to attend the next meeting of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Center so that the ACMR might be better informed about the existing programs and problems.