

# WHAT THE FIRST PAN AMERICAN CONFERENCE OF PROFESSORS OF HYGIENE MEANS TO THE PAN AMERICAN SANITARY BUREAU

HUGH S. CUMMING, M.D.

*Director, Pan American Sanitary Bureau*

On the opening of this First Pan American Conference of Professors of Hygiene, there comes to mind the melancholy thought that this is but one more occasion on which an added weight of responsibility has fallen upon the institutions of the New World. Among the most deplorable casualties of this most savage of wars have been many touching very closely our own field of public health. The Health Organization of the League of Nations and the International Office of Public Hygiene have been compelled practically to suspend operations.

Fortunately, this is far from being the case with our own Pan American Sanitary Bureau, which, by the way, is the oldest international health body in the world, having been in existence for more than four decades and antedating the two organizations previously referred to. The Bureau has seen an unprecedented expansion of its duties and functions, and every recent meeting of Pan American health authorities has resulted in new suggestions and directives for its activities.

This is not said in a spirit of self-glorification, but humbly and in full consciousness of the obligations entailed by this growth. Yet the fact itself is symbolic of a phenomenon which we have no right to overlook. Out of the maelstrom which has engulfed humanity, there rises the hope of a triumphant new world. When the apparently indestructible structures of centuries were broken like reeds, the institutions raised by the democracies of the western continent stood the test of war and came out stronger and more inspiring than before. The lights have gone out in Europe. The beacons of hope still shine brightly on this side of the ocean.

Other continents have contributed considerably, and even splendidly, to our public health structure, but its practical application, its integration, coordination, and logical evolution, have been primarily American contributions. It has been stated that the development of laboratories as part of the health departments was peculiarly American; the statement may be considerably extended and still remain true. American leadership in public health since the days of Finlay, Penna, Gorgas, and Cruz, is an indisputable fact. It is the joint responsibility of all our nations to have it continue and even expand its beneficent influence.

Many conferences of various subject and scope have been organized or sponsored by the Pan American Sanitary Bureau in the course of its existence. However, I do not feel the slightest hesitation in affirming that this meeting we are opening today yields to none in immediate importance and future possibilities.

The enthusiastic reception of the idea both on the part of the professors of hygiene in medical schools of Latin America and on that of the schools of public health in the United States, clearly demonstrates that they hold similar views of its significance. This is perhaps because sanitarians realize better than any other group that public health is indeed a matter for discussion and exchange of opinion, the filtering of theory through experience, and the application of considered collective judgment.

Our Pan American Sanitary Conferences have often emphasized how important was the proper teaching of hygiene and the fact that scientific training of future sanitarians is a prerequisite for efficient public health work. As far back as 1911 the Fifth Conference recommended that all the countries organize special practical courses for training public health officers; the Sixth, 1920, urged the establishment of the career of public health officers; the Seventh (1924), recommended that, without prejudice to the instruction of all physicians in hygiene, there be opened special Schools of Public Health for the training of men in that specialty; and these resolutions have been echoed by subsequent Conferences.

The professors of hygiene of Latin America have been through the years the most cohesive and permanent, and probably the most influential force in the Pan American Sanitary Conferences, and also in the activities of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau. In fact, there is a professor here who reminded me the other day that he had been attending our conferences longer than I had, and I have been attending them since 1924. Another of us here today takes pride in recalling that he represented fully one-third of the enrollment of the first course given in the first school of public health in the United States. It is perhaps to balance this state of affairs that we oldsters are meeting with you at the youngest of the schools of public health in this country.

Speaking seriously, the qualifications and abilities of the experts here gathered together offer a strong guarantee that something very practical and valuable will come out of this Ann Arbor Conference. It was gatherings such as this that Elihu Root, Secretary of State, had in mind in 1906, when he said,

"The association of so many eminent men from all the Republics, leaders of opinion in their own homes; the friendships that will arise among you; the habit of temperate and kindly discussion of matters of common interest; the ascertainment of common sympathies and aims; the dissipation of misunderstandings; the exhibition to all the American peoples of this peaceful and considerate method of conferring upon international questions—this alone, quite irrespective of the resolutions you may adopt, . . . will mark a substantial advance in the direction of international good understanding."

An enormous responsibility rests upon the professor of hygiene. In friendly competition with the attraction exerted by the older and more remunerative branches of medicine, he must impress his students with the dignity and worth of his subject. Clinical medicine saves individual lives. On preventive medicine rests the very existence of society. It may be true that, statistically speaking, in a country of 130 million inhabitants no person is worth more than 0.000,000,76 per cent. Yet pub-

lic health embraces other elements beyond biodemography, and in its tables no life is valued at less than 100% while the total rises to billions.

The professor of hygiene must distinguish between the permanent and the temporary; the ideal and enduring from the expedient; he must weigh and expound values; he must believe firmly in what he teaches. At one time or another, if he is conscious of his mission, he must become apostle as well as teacher, soldier as well as philosopher, leader as well as scholar. While interpreting the best available knowledge and adapting it to the needs of the moment, he must be ever alive to new impulses and ideas and incorporate them into his teachings if he is to remain the driving force that he must be in his field. His instruction must be practical and closely related to life. At the recent meeting of the American Public Health Association, one of the most distinguished former deans of Johns Hopkins, Dr. Freeman, remarked how gratified he felt at seeing so many former students occupying responsible positions in public health. This is the best measurement of the success of a teacher: to see his influence prolonged and at work. His are not merely pupils, but followers and co-workers.

Yet the duty of the professor of hygiene does not end with his specialized curriculum. As Welch, a pioneer in this as well as in many other fields, very aptly said, the function of a school of hygiene is not only to train health officers, but to reach into the medical school and contribute to the training of physicians going into general practice. The professor of hygiene must keep in mind the diversity as well as the unity of his discipline: public health must enlist the services of scientists as well as practitioners, engineers as well as physicians, dentists, laboratory technicians, entomologists, statisticians, and last but not least, nurses and social workers.

A word of apology should perhaps be inserted here for the *ex cathedra* nature of some of these remarks. Apparently, association with professors tends to make one didactic, but this is undoubtedly better than becoming dogmatic or even enigmatic.

One point should, however, be stressed. Public health must be taught, not only to graduate and undergraduate students, but also to the people in general, and very often to their rulers. Professors of hygiene in Latin America have undertaken this latter duty to an extent almost unimagined in this country, becoming in fact pioneers in practically every sanitary advancement. An old friend, fortunately with us here at this moment, organized the first social service school in his country back in the twenties. Although Latin America has as yet but one School of Public Health, an example expected to be multiplied in the not distant future, it has had courses in public health and professors of that specialty for more than a century. In fact, some of the greatest personalities of Latin American medicine have honored this post and also honored themselves by filling it with distinction. We have with us today their worthy successors.

In recalling one of these men, I should like to pause for a moment, as he is entitled to our attention from more than one standpoint. He was not only one of the greatest of Argentine statesmen and physicians, but

also the son of an American doctor, and an ardent friend of the United States, as all Argentine scientists have invariably been and especially those in the field of public health. I refer to Guillermo Rawson who became the first professor of hygiene in Argentina in 1873, and while occupying that position read, at Philadelphia in 1876, during the Centennial of our Independence, an epoch-making paper on vital statistics of Buenos Aires. Argentina has been mentioned since she heads alphabetically the list of the American republics and has long and prominently shared in all our inter-American health activities. Aráoz-Alfaro, Hous-say and Sussini as well as Zwanck and Sordelli, still rank high indeed in our councils. What has been said about the country of San Martín and Sarmiento could as well be repeated about each of the other republics from the smallest, Costa Rica, to the largest, Brazil.

It is no exaggeration to state that the opportunities before this Conference are practically unlimited. We must find ways to coordinate our efforts in the teaching of public health as we have been doing with increasing efficiency in public health practice. We must know better what the different schools and institutions may offer to students from other countries. It has been the frequent experience of many of us to see individuals, and even organizations, plan activities which have long been taken care of through existing bodies, and to prevent this it is essential that the exchange of information among the groups devoted to the teaching of hygiene be extended and improved. Out of this meeting there may well develop interchanges both of professors and student groups, a better knowledge and larger use of present facilities, and a more constant and effective exchange of additional material of all types. In this latter connection the consultative services of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau are always available, and in fact, have long been utilized.

We shall also have here full and frank exchange of information on the part of Latin American professors which may serve to crystallize their views on many questions, methods, and techniques. Furthermore, both Latin American and North American professors will gain a better understanding of their common problems and difficulties, and perhaps discover where and how their methods can be made more uniform. The more identical their programs become the closer they will come to the ideal, unattainable as this be, as their work will represent the consensus of an opinion reached by well-trained minds. On their return to their respective countries, the visiting professors will be better qualified to speak authoritatively on the kind of teaching furnished by the schools of public health of the United States, and will know definitely what, if anything, these can offer to graduate students from their own countries. In my opinion, there is nothing but good to be expected from any candid criticism which these very competent visitors may make of North American methods.

As stated in the announcement of the Conference, it is hoped that this is only the first of a series to be held on even a larger scale in the future in different countries of the Continent. The Pan American Sanitary Bureau will naturally lend its best support to this purpose. It is not too much to expect that a valuable collection of pertinent material will come out of these meetings, as was the case in the reunions organized by the Health Organization of the League of Nations (on which I served from its very beginning).

There is no question that there is ample room for improvement in the teaching of public health both North and South of the Equator. It is from groups such as this and conferences such as the present that ideas and suggestions may be received which will be translated into advances and progress.

What do we expect from this meeting? Those participating in it are undoubtedly the ones to decide the matter. However, should I be permitted to voice a humble opinion, I might be inclined to say the following: The caliber of the men attending it may induce us to become too ambitious. At the start it might perhaps be well to be modest and content ourselves with forging the links of one more friendly chain of thought and sentiment to unite all our countries. We might then look forward to putting into simple language a few definitions of what the teaching of hygiene should include both as to actual teaching and personnel and material resources incorporating some strong recommendations of what we all should do to make it more efficient, more valuable, and more uniform throughout the Continent, and we should not neglect to send expressions of encouragement as well as of guidance to all those who struggle with this problem.

We also pleasurably anticipate a two-way Gulf Stream of knowledge which will warm both our Continents with its constant currents of information on all phases of science and especially public health. We are bringing at present to this country distinguished lecturers on tropical medicine and we confidently hope to see this activity enlarged.

This occasion must not pass without my expressing the thanks of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau to the Kellogg Foundation and to our capable good friend, Dr. Darling, for their generous assistance in this as in other problems and particularly for their offer to publish the proceedings of our meeting with pertinent material in different languages; to the University of Michigan for its traditional kind hospitality; to the Association of Schools of Public Health of the United States, which welcomed as a body the idea of the conference and made it possible while its component members have outdone themselves in receiving and entertaining the visitors; and to the professors of hygiene of all parts of Latin America, who accepted so enthusiastically the invitation to attend, and who have made such splendid contributions to the success of the enterprise through their knowledge and interest and especially, their good nature in the face of the inconveniences which travel in wartime invariably brings about.

In concluding, let me in all earnestness remind our Latin American sanitarian-professors—that awesome combination of the University dignitary and the public health practitioner—that even if they are now going to have their own assemblies it is our sincere hope that they will regard it their duty to continue to be present at the Pan American Sanitary Conferences, remaining as in the past, a force for steady, solid and scientific work on a hemispheric basis. There are no better men anywhere to perform this most important mission of good will and noble deeds.