

directing council



PAN AMERICAN
HEALTH
ORGANIZATION

XI Meeting

regional committee

WORLD
HEALTH
ORGANIZATION

XI Meeting



Washington, D. C.
September 1959

CDL1/22, Rev. 1 (Eng.)
10 September 1959
ORIGINAL: SPANISH

Topic 18: ADVERTISING OF MEDICINAL PRODUCTS

(Topic proposed by the Government of Panama)

The XV Pan American Sanitary Conference in Puerto Rico, one year ago, examined the topic "Advertising of Medicinal Products", proposed by the Government of Panama.

During the discussions in Committee I (Technical Matters), all participants agreed on the need for emphasizing the importance of the problem raised by the Government of Panama and on the advisability that the PASO governing bodies give further study to this subject and to measures that could be adopted at the international level. With this in view, and on the recommendation of Committee I, the Conference adopted Resolution XXII, instructing the Director to include on the agenda of the XI Meeting of the Directing Council a topic on the problems arising from the advertising of medicinal products. Accordingly, and to facilitate the discussion of the topic, a brief description of the problem is presented below.

Present-day advertising of medicinal products falls into two distinct groups.

The first, designed to promote or increase the use of medical prescriptions, is intended solely for accredited physicians, dentists, and veterinarians for their professional use. This advertising, in general, conforms to ethical principles and, being directed to persons competent to judge the quality of a given product, presents no danger to the community.

The second -- and this is the group to which the Directing Council topic refers -- is aimed directly at the public, its object being to promote sales of a specific product in the community. It makes use of all available advertising media -- radio, newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, television, motion pictures -- to achieve its end. Such advertising, which seeks solely to raise sales of this-or-that product, is in the majority of instances based on misleading and inaccurate information. In many cases it is even dangerous, amounting to premeditated misrepresentation to the public.

Innumerable examples of this type of advertising, and of the terms used, could be cited. Mention is made of only a few.

Wide use is made of such expressions as "fantastic," "safe," "miraculous," "magic," "marvelous," "the best," "irreplaceable," "the most active," "unexcelled," "ideal" -- terms alluding to secret formulas or to new medical, chemical, or pharmaceutical discoveries; and there are myriad statements based on testimonials of "millions of persons," "physicians," and other professionals connected with medicine. Also, the cure of some ailment or disease is "guaranteed" or "assured," in the majority of cases with an offer to refund the customer's money if he is not satisfied with the drug. In some cases the product is advertised as the only effective cure for a given disease and, in others, it cures four or five diseases at once and even protects the individual from contracting as many other ailments. This type of popular advertising encourages self-medication, with all its terrible consequences. The sick individual, following the recommendations he sees or hears every day, may take one of those products for his ailments and get no relief at all or only temporary relief, thus allowing his condition to worsen; or, what is worse, the action of the product used may mask the disease and delay his visit to the doctor, with the result that the definitive diagnosis is often too late for him to be cured or even helped.

Business in modern times unquestionably requires advertising of any products to be offered to the consumer, and in the case under discussion millions of dollars are spent annually and work is provided for thousands of persons in this activity. Therefore, it must be made clear that there is no objection to advertising of medicinal products, but we insist that in such advertising any false statements or presentation that tend to deceive the public should be eliminated.

Naturally, the government of any country may take the measures it deems advisable to control the advertising of medicinal products within its own borders, but such measures are insufficient because, with the rapid means of communication and the wide distribution of printed matter, foreign newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets are sold in the various countries and broadcasts from powerful transmitters are received from abroad. The same will soon be true of television programs.

A recent newspaper article claimed that the U.S. public is defrauded in the amount of fifty million dollars annually through the purchase of false drugs by mail. This figure may not be exact, but it should not be far from the fact, and it is certain that such a fabulous sale of medicinal products is made possible only through the popular advertising of them. If this represents the loss to one country, we should ask ourselves, how much does this type of advertising cost the American Hemisphere. And what is even more serious, if such loss refers to the money spent for drugs of bad quality, how are we to add up the health or life lost that could have been saved were it not for the misleading advertising of certain medicinal products?

For the foregoing reasons, the Delegation of Panama suggests that the Directing Council recommend to the governments of all the countries that they take the necessary measures to control the advertising of medicinal products in their domestic information media, and that on the international level measures be adopted to permit effective control in this matter. Should the Directing Council not deem it timely to make recommendations of this kind at this time, the matter should not be neglected and its study should be continued until such time as a decision can be reached.