

# Epidemiological Bulletin

PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION

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Vol. 14, No. 1

March 1993

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## Maternal Mortality in the Americas

Until very recently maternal death was considered to be a problem of relatively little public health importance in most countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Gradual recognition of the seriousness of the problem began in the 1980s, when the dimensions of this *silent epidemic* first began to become apparent in a series of studies on its epidemiology and consequences in various countries, among others: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras and Jamaica.

This research coincided, or was associated with, the emergence in the countries of organized women's movements and the demands they made for more equitable social treatment.

Various international conferences in turn reaffirmed the urgency of the problem and the need for solutions. These included the Interregional Meeting on the Prevention of Maternal Mortality, convened by WHO in 1985, the International Conference on Safe Motherhood, in Nairobi in 1987, and the Plan of Action approved at the United Nations World Summit for Children in New York in 1990.

In the Americas this movement became clearly established in PAHO policies in 1984 when the Directing Council called on the countries to take further action in matters concerning population. This policy was endorsed again in 1986 and 1988, and finally led to the Regional Plan of Action for the Reduction of

Maternal Mortality in the Americas, approved by the Pan American Sanitary Conference in 1990 (1).

Analyses of maternal mortality in the Region contained in both the Plan and other publications regard it as a social and health problem of major importance. Moreover, it reflects the great inequality and inequity of the reproductive process among a large proportion of the female population in countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Maternal death is the end result of a complex series of factors that act upon the life continuum of a woman from the time she is born through her childbearing years.

These determining factors of maternal mortality may be grouped as follows: those related to context, including the inferior economic, educational, legal, and family status of women and the conditions of poverty in which they live, which, in turn, determine their access to and control of social resources and the extent of their isolation; and, factors related to their previous state of health, their reproductive behavior, and the accessibility and quality of maternal health and family planning services.

The health status of women is conditioned by the environment in which they live, their levels of nutrition, the diseases they have suffered, such as hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease, and especially their previous obstetric histories.

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The reproductive behavior of women may in turn be associated with risk factors during their fertile period, especially during pregnancy. Among these are their age at first delivery, the number of pregnancies they have had, and their perceptions of their own health during pregnancy and the puerperium and of their need for greater accessibility to health services.

The variables that have a more obvious influence on maternal health are those that are related to access to appropriate health technology that can provide quality care. Despite the progress observed, unsatisfied demand continues to exist in a large number of countries in the Region, along with insufficient coverage and quality of prenatal, delivery, and family planning services.

The economic crisis that has affected the social sectors has also contributed to deterioration of the health services and to a decrease in the problem-solving capacity of a large proportion of these services in the countries of the Region.

Cultural factors and women's perceptions of their needs and the risks involved in pregnancy are, in turn, determinants of the use of the health services. In a significant segment of the population maternity is considered to be a normal occurrence of daily life that does not require special attention.

The confluence of these factors determines the coverage and quality observed in the family planning, prenatal, and delivery services described below.

### Family Planning

The level of knowledge of contraceptive methods is high in the countries of the Region. More than 90% of women between the ages of 15 and 44 years know of at least one contraceptive method, according to the most recent available information (2). However, only 53% of women living with male partners used some method; a considerable proportion used traditional methods (3).

Efforts to reduce maternal mortality should assign priority to satisfying the unmet demand for services to regulate fertility, which in some countries and social groups is high, and also to prevent unwanted pregnancies, which are very frequent in the Region, according to results of the Demographic and Health Surveys (4). It has been estimated (5) that 37% and 32% of maternal deaths in Colombia and Mexico, respectively, could have been avoided if all the women with unmet fertility regulation needs had access to the use of an effective contraceptive that would have spared them from having more children.

A large proportion of these unmet needs may be the result of the medicalized approach prevalent in most of the health services, where the concerns or needs of women users are not addressed.

### Obstetric Care

Of 21 Latin American and Caribbean countries with available information, in five countries (Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, and Venezuela) the known coverage of prenatal care does not exceed 50% of pregnant women; in eleven other countries coverage is between 50% and 89% (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru); in four others, coverage is 90% or higher: Costa Rica, Cuba, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago (Table 1).

Similarly, of 24 Latin American and Caribbean countries with available information, in eight countries (Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras,

Table 1. Coverage of maternal health services in the Region of the Americas, by country, 1985-1988.

Country groups	Coverage (%)		
	Contraceptive use <sup>1</sup>	Prenatal care	Institutional birth
<i>Group 1</i>			
Bolivia	30	50	38
Dominican Republic	50	52	52
Ecuador	53	48	56
El Salvador	47	34	34
Guatemala	23	34	23
Haiti	10	67	20
Honduras	41	66	26
Nicaragua	31	81	40
Paraguay	48	56	35
Peru	46	62	49
<i>Group 2</i>			
Brazil	66	65	70
Colombia	66	76	75
Guyana	31	33	90
Jamaica	43	95	82
Mexico	53	68	81
Venezuela	49	35	97
<i>Group 3</i>			
Argentina	...	...	93
Bahamas	...	...	99
Chile	56	60	98
Costa Rica	70	90	94
Cuba	70	98	100
Panama	58	75	86
Suriname	55	...	...
Trinidad & Tobago	53	96	98
Uruguay	...	...	96
<i>Group 4</i>			
Canada	73	...	...
United States	74	...	99

Source: Database GDR/HMPP/PAHO/93.

<sup>1</sup>Women of childbearing age living with partners.

...Data not available.

Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru) less than 50% of pregnant women receive institutional delivery care. Three countries, which account for 60% of the total population of Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico) have institutional coverage that ranges between 70% and 81%. In only nine countries does the coverage of institutional delivery care reach 90% or more (Argentina, Bahamas, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, and Venezuela).

The deficient coverage and limited quality of the maternal care services do not respond to the health needs of the population in question. An evaluation of the efficiency of the maternal and child care services carried out between 1985 and 1989 in 15 countries in the Region showed that maternal ambulatory services and hospital obstetric services were both deficient, since only 39% of the former and 8% of the latter were operating under conditions considered acceptable for carrying out their missions (6). What is even more disturbing in this regard, however, is that the trend of the leading causes of maternal mortality over time confirms that the health services in most of the countries have not succeeded in changing this situation in the last decade, or in the best of cases, to only a minimal degree.

In daily practice the Region's health services continue to be characterized by operational deficiencies and, due to inadequate prenatal care, fail to detect in a timely manner, pregnancy-induced hypertension; fail to provide timely intervention in the event of hemorrhage, as a result of geographic inaccessibility, deficient transportation or its unaffordability, and the lack of blood supplies at the first referral level; and fail to provide quality care at delivery, as evidenced by the high number of maternal deaths caused by infection and obstructed delivery.

It is unquestionable, on the other hand, that the lion's share of responsibility for the deterioration of the coverage and quality of the health services in the Region may be attributed to the financial constraints imposed upon the public sector by the policies adopted to bring about structural adjustment of the economy.

## Maternal Mortality

For women in Latin America and the Caribbean the risk<sup>1</sup> of dying from maternal causes during their reproductive life varies among countries and is reflected in significant differences in the national maternal mortality rates (Table 2) as well as in the rates according

<sup>1</sup>Reproductive risk is the inverse of the probability of a woman's death, due to maternal causes, during her reproductive life. The probability is estimated by dividing the number of maternal deaths by the number of women age 15 to 49 years in the population and multiplying the quotient by 35 (average duration, in years, of the reproductive period). By taking the inverse of this probability, it is possible to obtain the number of women at risk, one of whom will die from maternal causes during her reproductive life. The higher the number obtained, the lower the probability of dying from maternal causes and the smaller the risk.

to geographical regions, urban and rural residence, education, and other social factors investigated in recent years (7, 8, 9).

Analysis of the information available in PAHO's Technical Information System (TIS) for recent years shows that maternal deaths are among the ten leading causes of death of women of childbearing age in 23 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean; in 11 of these countries they rank among the first five causes. The percent of these deaths in relation to deaths of women from 15 to 49 years of age is also sizable, since they account for 20.2% in Paraguay in contrast with Canada and the United States, where they barely account for 0.5% (Table 3).

Maternal deaths may be classified into direct and indirect obstetric deaths. The former are due to complications of pregnancy, delivery, and the puerperium, including complications of abortion, and account for more than 90% of all maternal deaths, except in Cuba (Table 4). Indirect deaths are the result of preexisting conditions that have been aggravated by pregnancy or delivery.

Generally speaking, in most of the countries abortion, hemorrhage, toxemia, complications of the puerperium, and indirect causes appear among the five leading causes of death among women 15-49 years of age, and the order and magnitude of their contribution to total maternal mortality varies from one country to another (Table 4).<sup>2</sup>

There are no studies available that indicate to what extent each of the socioeconomic, cultural, and health services variables are reflected in the maternal mortality levels in countries. Nevertheless, an inverse relationship may be observed between maternal mortality rates and indicators of prenatal coverage, care at delivery, and prevalence of the use of contraceptives (Table 1). Laurenti established negative correlations between maternal mortality, the use of contraceptives, and professional care at delivery (10).

Another approach for measuring the relationship between maternal mortality and the quality of the health services and their geographic and cultural accessibility is provided by studies that demonstrate its avoidability or preventability. For example, in a recent study of 240 maternal deaths in Mexico (11), the authors concluded that 85% potentially could have been prevented. Assuming that this was done, the estimated maternal death rate of 114 per 100,000 live births recorded in the study would have been reduced 6.7 times. The same study concluded that 70% of the deaths could have been avoided if the quality of medical and institutional care provided had been adequate. In turn, the behavior patterns of the women or their families were involved,

<sup>2</sup>The data used for the analysis were for the last year reported to the PAHO Technical Information System by 23 countries.

**Table 2. Reproductive risk and maternal mortality per 100,000 live births in selected countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, last available year.**

Country	Year	Maternal mortality		Reproductive risk <sup>2</sup>
		Number	Rate <sup>1</sup>	
Argentina	1985	386	91	528
Barbados	1984	3	...	638
Belize	1986	4	...	243
Bolivia		837	332	50
Brazil	1985	1,892	140	520
Canada	1985	15	4	12,990
Chile	1985	131	41	700
Colombia	1985	720	100	289
Costa Rica	1985	29	26	663
Cuba	1985	84	26	914
Dominican Republic	1985	106	100	425
Ecuador	1985	397	160	159
El Salvador	1984	99	148	308
Guadalupe	1981	3	...	848
Guatemala	1984	236	240	210
Guyana	1984	17	80	412
Haiti		...	230	...
Honduras	1982	149	221	184
Jamaica	1984	14	115	1,176
Martinique	1981	3	...	857
Mexico	1985	1,702	82	324
Nicaragua		...	159	...
Panama	1985	33	49	468
Paraguay	1985	146	270	172
Peru	1983	611	303	220
Puerto Rico	1985	8	14	3,264
Suriname	1985	7	88	392
Trinidad & Tobago	1986	18	80	502
United States	1985	295	6.6	6,080
Uruguay	1985	23	26	873
Venezuela	1985	291	60	417

<sup>1</sup>Based on the number of deaths reported to the PAHO TIS, except Bolivia, based on data provided by the 1991 Demographic and Health Survey.

<sup>2</sup>Estimate based on TIS data published in *Health Conditions in the Americas*, 1990 edition. For a definition of reproductive risk, see page 3.

...Data not available.

in this particular example in the chain of events that led to 22% of all preventable maternal deaths.

In general, it may be concluded from the available information that variable declines in maternal mortality have been registered in most of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, albeit with differences in the contribution to the leading causes of death.

These declines and underregistration notwithstanding, a group of countries is registering a maternal mortality rate similar to that of Sweden at the beginning of the century, of 227 per 100,000 live births (12); a second group of countries has a rate equal to that of Italy in 1955, 133.3 per 100,000 live births (13); and a third group, the most advanced, presents figures similar to those for 1950 in the State of Massachusetts,

United States, of 50 per 100,000 live births (14). This appears to indicate that the Latin American and Caribbean countries are 35 to 90 years behind countries and states with low maternal mortality and that they must breach this gap as soon as possible by means of greater social development and the use of appropriate technology to provide better health care for women.

### Obstetric Morbidity

Little information is available for Latin America and the Caribbean on maternal morbidity for the total female population. What is available is based on registration of consultations and hospital discharges, with all the limitations of comparability and false positives that this implies.

Measham and Rochat (15) estimated a ratio of 10 to 15 morbid episodes of a certain degree of severity per maternal death. Based on this ratio, it could be estimated that between 280,000 and 420,000 annual episodes of severe intercurrent obstetric problems arise among the approximately 12 million women who give birth every year in the Region.

A total of 860,000 women were hospitalized in the United States in 1987 for reasons related to pregnancy but not with delivery, which means that one out of every five pregnancies required hospitalization for pathological episodes. Of these women, 27% were hospitalized for premature labor, 9% for spontaneous abortion, 8% for genitourinary infection, 8% for hemorrhage in the first half of pregnancy, 6% for vomiting, 7% for pregnancy-induced hypertension, 5% for diabetes mellitus, and the remaining 4% for failed attempted abortion (16).

A study carried out by the Mexican Social Security Institute in 1989 found that of 740,000 hospital discharges for obstetric causes, 80.5% were related to delivery, and the remaining 19.5% to various episodes of morbidity during pregnancy. This means that for each four deliveries, one hospitalization was registered for complications of pregnancy, distributed as follows: abortions, 44.2%; other complications of pregnancy, 30.6%; hemorrhage, 13.7%, and toxemia, 11.5% (17).

If the ratio of delivery to complications of pregnancy of these two series is applied to the estimated figure of 12 million births in Latin America and the Caribbean, it may be inferred that the probable number of hospitalizations necessary during pregnancy fluctuates between 2.4 and 3 million (18), that is, six to seven times more than the estimated figures based on the figure by Measham and Rochat.

A data series collected in several countries of the Region, using a standardized instrument, by the PAHQ Latin American Center for Perinatology (CLAP),<sup>3</sup> showed that premature rupture of membranes, urinary infection, threatened premature delivery,<sup>4</sup> pre-eclampsia, and pregnancy-induced hypertension<sup>4</sup> were among the five leading causes of morbidity registered for the prenatal period. Urinary infection ranked in first place in the institutions that were studied in suburban Argentina and in Ecuador; premature rupture of membranes was predominant in metropolitan institutions in Argentina, and in Brazil and Chile. Threatened premature delivery and pre-eclampsia also appeared among the five leading causes of morbidity in all the countries.

There is no basis for assuming that the prevalence of these conditions is similar among the general population. However, it is considered that abortion and hemorrhage are less represented in this series, since

**Table 3. Total number of deaths of women 15-44 years of age, and deaths from complications of pregnancy, childbirth, and the puerperium (ICD-9,630-676) in selected countries of the Region of the Americas, last available year.**

Country (year)	Deaths women 15-44 years		
	Total	Maternal	Maternal causes (%)
Argentina (1986)	7,409	369	5.0
Brazil (1986)	41,685	1,814	4.4
Canada (1988)	3,994	18	0.5
Chile (1987)	2,607	135	5.2
Colombia (1984)	7,965	642	8.1
Costa Rica (1988)	489	15	3.1
Cuba (1988)	3,143	73	2.3
Dominican Rep. (1985)	1,568	106	6.8
Ecuador (1987)	3,088	355	11.5
El Salvador (1984)	1,626	99	6.1
Guatemala (1984)	3,888	236	6.1
Guyana (1984)	268	16	6.0
Honduras (1982)	1,145	149	13.0
Jamaica (1984)	444	14	3.2
Mexico (1986)	21,177	1,681	7.9
Panama (1987)	442	22	5.0
Paraguay (1986)	692	140	20.2
Peru (1983)	5,333	611	11.5
Puerto Rico (1987)	732	11	1.5
Trinidad & Tobago (1986)	366	18	4.9
United States (1987)	49,874	251	0.5
Uruguay (1987)	629	15	2.4
Venezuela (1987)	4,345	251	5.8

Source: *Health Conditions in the Americas*, 1990 edition.

most of those episodes are treated on medical-surgical emergency basis or do not seek any kind of care.

It is estimated that there are 65 abortions yearly per 1,000 women of childbearing age in Latin America, and that this figure is even higher in urban areas (19), which would suppose a proportion of at least one abortion for every two or three deliveries in the subregion. This denotes a serious problem of morbidity in women of childbearing age, that affects society as a whole and whose solution will require prompt measures to improve the programs for preventing abortion and providing care for its complications.

A phenomenon that is assuming serious proportions in the Region is the excess of deliveries by cesarean section. A collaborative study by CLAP<sup>5</sup> that covered 16 countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela), confirmed that more than half of the 176 hospitals studied showed a

<sup>3</sup> Perinatal Clinical History (CLAP/PAHO, 1990.)

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication from CLAP.

<sup>5</sup> According to this investigation, the risk of death was greater in cases in which cesarean section was performed. In addition, the duration of the hospital stay doubled, thereby increasing the cost of delivery care.

**Table 4. Mortality rates (per 100,000 live births) and structure of maternal mortality by group of causes, in countries of the Region of the Americas, last available year.**

Country (year)	Abortion (630-639)		Hemorrhage (640,641,666)		Toxemia (642.4-642.9, 643)		Complications of the puerperium (670-676)		Other direct causes (642.0- 642.3, 644-646, 651-665, 667-669, 650)		Indirect causes (647-648)	
	Rate	%	Rate	%	Rate	%	Rate	%	Rate	%	Rate	%
Argentina (1986)	19.8	35.0	7.8	13.3	8.9	15.8	8.1	14.3	11.0	19.5	0.9	1.6
Brazil (1986)	6.2	13.2	7.5	16.0	13.5	28.9	7.5	16.0	8.6	18.4	3.5	7.5
Canada (1988)	0.3	6.0	0.8	16.0	1.4	28.0	2.2	44.0	0.3	6.0	-	0.0
Chile (1987)	16.2	34.9	3.8	8.1	5.5	11.8	11.4	24.5	7.2	15.9	2.4	5.2
Colombia (1986)	17.7	10.3	34.0	17.8	40.0	23.3	18.0	10.5	60.0	34.9	2.0	0.2
Costa Rica (1988)	1.3	6.7	5.3	26.7	5.3	26.7	2.6	13.2	5.3	26.7	-	0.0
Cuba (1988)	9.0	21.8	1.1	2.7	3.4	8.2	6.8	16.5	7.4	17.9	13.6	32.9
Dominican Republic (1985)	9.1	17.0	8.6	16.1	13.6	25.5	-	0.0	17.6	33.0	4.5	8.4
Ecuador (1988)	8.0	7.3	26.9	24.6	27.2	25.0	8.0	7.3	37.2	34.0	2.0	1.8
El Salvador (1984)	4.2	7.9	4.2	7.1	3.0	5.1	4.7	8.0	42.2	71.7	0.6	1.0
Guatemala (1984)	12.4	17.0	1.2	1.6	7.4	10.1	11.1	15.2	38.4	52.7	2.5	3.4
Guyana (1984)	61.5	30.8	80.6	40.5	34.6	17.3	11.5	5.7	11.5	5.7	-	0.0
Jamaica (1984)	73.8	65.8	7.7	6.9	24.6	21.5	-	0.0	6.1	5.4	-	0.0
Mexico (1986)	6.8	8.9	19.0	24.8	15.0	19.7	6.8	8.9	27.7	36.2	1.2	1.6
Panama (1987)	8.8	22.9	1.7	4.4	7.0	18.2	-	0.0	19.3	50.1	1.7	4.4
Paraguay (1986)	14.8	13.5	33.6	30.7	19.5	17.8	18.7	17.2	18.0	16.5	4.7	4.3
Peru (1983)	10.2	11.2	30.3	33.2	7.7	8.4	13.2	14.4	29.6	32.4	0.4	0.4
Puerto Rico (1987)	-	0.0	1.3	6.8	3.8	19.8	9.0	46.8	5.1	26.6	-	0.0
Suriname (1985)	9.5	14.2	47.7	71.6	9.5	14.2	-	0.0	-	0.0	-	0.0
Trinidad & Tobago (1986)	54.8	51.7	6.4	6.0	29.0	27.3	6.9	6.1	3.2	3.0	6.4	6.0
United States (1987)	1.2	17.6	0.9	13.2	0.9	13.2	2.3	33.9	1.1	16.2	0.4	5.9
Uruguay (1988)	1.9	5.0	3.8	10.0	3.8	10.0	15.3	38.0	15.3	38.0	-	0.0
Venezuela (1987)	10.4	19.4	9.2	17.2	13.7	25.7	6.6	12.3	9.6	17.9	4.0	7.5

Source: TIS, PAHO.

-Zero magnitude.

proportion of cesarean sections ranging from 17% to 29.4% in the period 1981-1985 (20).

The growing importance being assigned to measuring the costs of health services has created an opinion trend among governments and financing agencies toward devising and applying methodologies to assess cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness in the provision of health services.

With regard to maternal health this implies, inter alia, being able to quantify the cost of preventing a maternal death and preventing episodes of morbidity in women during pregnancy and the puerperium. The usefulness of this effort is to demonstrate to the still skeptical--those who are usually called upon to allocate resources for maternal health programs--that the cost-benefit of safe motherhood surpasses the social and family costs of maternal death. However, no studies have been carried out to identify and quantify the social and family costs of a maternal death, nor have the compensation measures been quantified that the families and the community would be entitled to, as a result of the disability or death of mothers from almost

entirely preventable causes (21). This situation is perfectly consistent with the role of women and the social value they are assigned in most countries of the Region, since up until only a few years ago it would have been unthinkable to put a price tag on *nonproductive activity* (household work) for which *wages are not paid*, which is precisely the principal economic activity performed mostly by women in these latitudes.

PAHO's Regional Plan of Action for the Reduction of Maternal Mortality in the Americas points to a cost of slightly more than \$US 300 million a year to diminish maternal mortality by 50% (1). The World Bank estimated that the cost to save one life ranges between \$US 190 and \$US 3,100, and to prevent a pathological event, between \$US 75 and \$US 100 (4).

Research carried out in Tlaxcala, Mexico, on the social cost of maternal death measured the resulting homelessness, loss of schooling, and the family impact of such an event (22). However, the focus of the study was only partial, since it appears not to include evaluation of the economic, labor, political, and cultural

losses that derive from a death due to causes that are preventable at low cost.

The great majority of maternal deaths are avoidable, since their principal causes and determining factors are known. It is also true that sufficient scientific and technological knowledge for preventing such deaths has been available for a long time.

In general terms it may be argued that improving the educational and health conditions of women can have a positive influence on the outcome of their pregnancies. What is indisputable, however, is that by providing cultural, economic, and geographic access to health services of good quality, early detection of risk would take place, and the number of maternal deaths substantially reduced through prenatal care, availability of the essential elements for obstetric care, and provision of appropriate information for prevention of unwanted pregnancies.

According to various studies carried out in Latin America, estimates of the avoidability of maternal death range between 52% in Mexico (23) to 92% in Colombia (24). For example, if the entire Region of the Americas had conditions similar to those in Canada, maternal deaths would be reduced 47 times; and 85% of such deaths could be avoided merely by correcting omissions of the health services and modifying family behavior with regard to maternity and the use of the health services<sup>6</sup>.

It is estimated that if the current health situation persists, the Region will suffer an estimated annual loss of more than 1 million potential years of women's emotional and social life.

## Intervention Strategies

The growing commitment of the governments of the Region, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations to the health of women, their reproductive health, and especially maternal health prompted PAHO to formulate in 1990 the Plan of Action for the Reduction of Maternal Mortality in the Americas (1). This Plan was approved by the Ministers of Health of the countries of the Region of the Americas at the XXIII Pan American Sanitary Conference that same year. The broad strategic guidelines proposed in the Plan include:

- Define a policy of providing comprehensive health care to women and preventing maternal morbidity and mortality;
- Set targets for the reduction of maternal mortality by at least 50%, to be attained within the next 10 years;
- Carry out programs for communication and dissemination of information to build collective awareness and informed public opinion on the protection of maternity and promotion of reproductive health;

- Design and execute action plans for reduction of maternal mortality, including, whenever appropriate, the goals, intervention strategies, and action guidelines and policies proposed in the Regional Plan;
- Undertake an analysis of the cost of the national plan for reduction of maternal mortality, define a strategy for financing it, and assign to it the necessary resources;
- Make special efforts to enlist the participation of other sectors in the implementation of actions to promote women's health and maternal health;
- Make a special effort toward improving the quality and use of demographic, health, and services information in order to maintain an up-to-date assessment of women's health situation in general, and their reproductive health, in particular;
- Establish a maternal mortality surveillance system;
- Evaluate the national plan for reduction of maternal mortality every two years and inform PAHO on its progress;
- Continue efforts to achieve rapid progress in executing maternal and child health and family planning programs, and intensify activities aimed at high-risk groups, especially those focusing on promoting women's health and protecting their reproductive health, with the goal of reducing existing differences within and between countries.

These guidelines were divided into two large groups of activities, one aimed at promoting the health conditions of women and modifying their reproductive behavior, and the other directed at the health services.

### a) Promotion of the Health Conditions of Women

This includes the promotion of healthy behavior during adolescence, during the periods between pregnancies, and in procreation; it also includes promotion of timely use of the health services and motivation and support for organized responses by the community and women's groups to the needs of the reproductive period and women's participation in the entire process of their health care. Its principal lines of action are:

- Update existing legislation on the protection of the health of women and the family to make explicit the right of women to health care and to protection of their reproductive health;
- Develop comprehensive health programs for women in institutional and community contexts, including education for sexual health;
- Revise national legislation on abortion in order to facilitate its care with a preventive component as well as the free and timely care of complications;
- Strengthen and improve knowledge and actions by the community and by organized women's groups in order to promote optimum health conditions for women;

<sup>6</sup> Figure estimated by Bobadilla and collaborators in a recent study in Mexico City (11).

- Use social, group, and intersectoral communications media to promote health programs for women and to foster enhanced utilization of health services;
- Develop supplementary feeding programs for pregnant women with nutritional problems;
- Develop comprehensive fertility regulation programs with unrestricted access for all users, both men and women;
- Include educational activities on sexual health within adolescent health program;
- Prevent unwanted pregnancies and educate the female carriers of certain diseases aggravated by pregnancy on the risks generated under such conditions;.
- Promote the recognition among health service providers of the importance of promotion and prevention activities within comprehensive care programs for women.

#### *b) Actions Directed at the Health Services*

This second group of activities is aimed at reactivating the health systems through new care models; strengthening the various processes involved in the administration of care, training, research, information, and evaluation; emphasizing the quality and humanization of the care provided; expanding the problem-solving capacity of the services; and eliminating economic, geographic, and cultural barriers.

This reactivation of the health services includes activities designed to:

- Implement permanent training systems on the basis of updated standards;
- Develop epidemiological and social research, including investigation of community perceptions;
- Improve the systems for epidemiological surveillance of deaths of women of childbearing age and the recording of information on health actions relating to pregnancy, delivery, the puerperium, and family planning;
- Promote humanized health care for women;
- Eliminate the economic barriers that stand in the way of women's access to health services;
- Reorganize maternal care services based on universal coverage and the risk approach;
- Improve the operational efficiency of maternal care services, strengthening the problem-solving capacity of the first level of referral;
- Increase the coverage and quality of prenatal care, with emphasis on pregnant women in rural and marginal urban areas;
- Prevent abortion and improve care for incomplete abortion;
- Rationalize the use of technologies;
- Develop alternative models of maternal care, homes for high-risk pregnant women, birthing centers, and clean delivery at home by traditional midwives.

#### **Role of PAHO**

In order to assist in implementing these strategies, PAHO's Program on Maternal and Child Health has designed a Plan of Action for 1992-1995 (25). This Plan is based on three pillars: a) developing epidemiological surveillance of maternal mortality in the Region; b) promoting the implementation of the national plans of action simultaneously with the mobilization of resources for their execution and the measurement of their costs; and c) supporting intercountry initiatives aimed at improving technologies and sharing experiences.

In brief, the aim is to promote widespread agreement at the country and international levels in executing the Regional Plan of Action for the Reduction of Maternal Mortality in the Americas as a means of reducing the overwhelming social debt owed to the women of this Region.

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(Source: Program on Maternal and Child Health and Population, PAHO.)

## Calendar of Meetings

16 to 18 June 1993 Keystone, Colorado, USA	Twenty-sixth Annual Meeting Society for Epidemiological Research (SER)	Dr. Richard Hamman Dept. of Preventive Medicine and Biometrics UCHSC, Box 425, Denver, Colorado 80262, USA Tel. (303) 270-6863 Fax (303) 270-3183
24 August to 11 September 1993 Montreal, Quebec, Canada	Twenty-second International Conference on Population International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP)	Réjean Lachapelle Ottawa, Ontario, Canadá Tel. (613) 951-3763, or Bruno Remiche IUSSP 34, rue des Augustins, B-4000 Liège, Belgium Tel. 32(41) 22-40-80 Fax 32(41) 22-38-47
18 to 22 October 1993 Buenos Aires, Argentina	Second Pan American Congress on Epidemiology and Health Care. In commemoration, Tenth anniversary of the 1983 Buenos Aires Seminar on Current Uses and Future Prospects of Epidemiology	Dr. Jorge Daniel Lemus Cerviño 3356, 7mo piso División Area Programática 1425 Capital Federal, Argentina Tel. 54(1) 801-0020 Fax 54(1) 801-7767
27 to 29 October 1993 Havana, Cuba	Fourth Cuban Congress on Microbiology and Parasitology First Congress on Tropical Medicine	Prof. Gustavo Kourí Flores Presidente, Comité Organizador Instituto "Pedro Kourí" Apartado 601, Marianao 13, Ciudad de La Habana, Cuba Fax 21- 5957

# HIV and AIDS Research in Latin America and the Caribbean: 1983-1991

Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) is a growing public health problem in the Americas. As of December 1992, 59,723 AIDS cases had been reported in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). In addition, more than one million persons are already infected with HIV in these countries, and this number is expected to double by 1995.

In light of this rampant increase in the number of infected persons, research efforts in LAC could aid in controlling the spread of HIV infection. For instance, HIV research can provide the information needed to assess the magnitude of the problem, set program objectives, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of interventions. In other words, the results of HIV research can empower the LAC countries to control the spread of HIV.

However, HIV research not only provides guidance to HIV control strategies, but also is crucial both to the development of a new understanding of HIV's pathogenesis and natural history and to the generation of new interventions to prevent and treat HIV infection. This role of research is particularly important for LAC countries since current knowledge about HIV infection and effective control of its spread has been generated mostly in more developed countries and thus may not be totally applicable to those countries that are less developed. Given the social specificity of behaviors and other risk factors associated with HIV transmission and the geographic variability of the genetic structure of HIV strains that could translate into distinctive human immunological responses and clinical manifestations, studies among selected populations in LAC countries can provide a unique insight into the determinants of HIV infection and the interventions that can prevent it.

The status of HIV research in LAC has not been evaluated as yet. As a first step toward this objective, an inventory was conducted of HIV-related research projects in LAC countries in order to identify all past and ongoing HIV research. This paper summarizes the major features of this research as reflected in the inventory.

From March to September 1991, completed and ongoing HIV-related research projects were identified in Latin America and the Caribbean. In each country, principal investigators of these projects were then asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire to provide information about the research projects. These investigators were assisted in this endeavor by national collaborators specifically hired and trained for this purpose. If the principal investigator was not a resident

of the country in which the research was conducted, the top ranked associate national investigator completed the questionnaire.

The basic unit of analysis is the research project. A research project was defined as the sum total of organized activities a researcher carries out within an institution to generate scientific knowledge. These projects were classified into six content areas: (1) basic; (2) epidemiological, including natural history of HIV; (3) vaccine; (4) diagnostics; (5) clinical and drug development; and (6) social, behavioral, and intervention research. Projects were also categorized as descriptive or analytical, according to the purpose of the study, and as longitudinal or cross-sectional, depending on whether or not the study was designed to establish the temporal relationship between the event studied and exposure.

Principal investigators were also requested to list the total number of their previous scientific publications, whether HIV related or not. They were then asked whether the results of the HIV research projects reported to the inventory had been published and if so, where. In general, results were published as abstracts in the proceedings of scientific meetings, papers in national scientific journals, papers in scientific journals outside LAC (which will be considered international for our purposes), or as books or chapters in books.

The inventory identified a total of 652 projects; however, 68 were found to be ineligible and another 23 projects were considered to be part of a broader research undertaking that had already been reported to the inventory and thus were viewed as part of a single project. Therefore, the final sample size available for analysis was 561.

The first HIV research project in Latin America and the Caribbean was started in 1983. Since then 560 other research projects have been initiated up until 1991, the cutoff date of the inventory. The majority of these projects (73.6%) were begun in 1989 or thereafter, and only about one-third (34.8%) had been completed by the time the inventory was compiled.

Brazil and Mexico, with 143 and 135 research projects respectively, account for half (49.6%) of all HIV research projects in LAC. Another 20% of all projects were conducted in countries located in the Caribbean, 11.2% in the Andean subregion, 10.5% in the Southern Cone, and 8.9% in Central America.

A total of 1,630 researchers were involved in these projects, 388 of whom were principal investigators of one or more projects. The majority of the principal

investigators (90.5%) were natives of the country in which the study was conducted. Over one-third of the projects (37.9%) were conducted by researchers within academic institutions; roughly another third of the projects (32.4%) were carried out under the auspices of governmental public health institutions such as local or national epidemiology services. In addition, 20% of the projects were conducted in clinical health care settings having no academic affiliation, while the remainder (10%) were conducted primarily by nongovernmental organizations.

### Research Areas And Topics

Of the 561 HIV research projects, 38.5% were classified as epidemiological, 30.1% as social, behavioral, or interventional; and 23.5% as clinical. Subject areas studied less frequently were diagnostic procedures (4.5%) and basic science projects (3.4%), including HIV genetic variability studies.

In the epidemiology area, topics typically explored included HIV seroprevalence and epidemiological descriptions of the HIV situation, usually from epidemiological surveillance sources. Seroprevalence studies account for 18.7% of all research projects making seroprevalence along with knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) of respondents the most frequently studied topics. Twelve of the seroprevalence surveys were linked to a behavioral questionnaire.

In the area of social, behavioral, and intervention research, 105 projects, or 18.7% of all projects, surveyed the HIV-related KAP of respondents. The majority of the studies in the area of clinical and drug development addressed the frequency of occurrence of clinical manifestations of HIV infection either by anatomic system or specific opportunistic infectious agent. This issue accounted for 16.6% of all 561 projects, making it the third most broadly investigated topic. The rest of the studies in this area focused on the efficacy of either antiviral drugs or drugs that treat opportunistic infections related to HIV infection.

### Study Methodology

Study design varied among the research projects reported to the inventory. About 60% were cross-sectional in design; approximately 19% had longitudinal designs, including most natural history studies and 23 clinical trials; and 4.3% had retrospective designs. Nearly 10% of the studies were either case reviews or analyses of registries and other secondary data sources.

Almost half of the studies (49.4%) were based on convenience samples. Of the cross-sectional studies, 52% recruited convenience samples. These included the seroprevalence and KAP surveys, as well as those descriptive studies exploring the clinical manifestations

of HIV infection by either anatomic system or specific opportunistic infection agent.

About 30% of the studies had sample sizes smaller than 100, and another 29% had sample sizes between 100 and 400. In contrast, 24% of the research projects had sample sizes greater than 1000 subjects. Projects with sample sizes greater than 400 were more likely to research epidemiologic topics. In fact, unlinked seroprevalence surveys had large sample sizes since samples were usually obtained from screening programs such as those of blood banks. Sample sizes of 400 or more were also more likely to have cross-sectional rather than longitudinal or retrospective designs. In addition, they were associated with probability samples rather than nonprobability samples and with selection of subjects on the basis of their HIV status.

Brazil, Mexico and the Caribbean account for almost 90% of the funds spent on HIV-related research (Table 1). Close to two-thirds of all projects (65.2%) reported external funding only or a combination of external and internal funding. Almost one-fourth (23.4%) reported only internal funding while 11.4% did not provide their funding source. External funding of projects totaled \$US 26,914,814, with international funding providing more than half of this amount (59%).

International funding was the sole source of funds for 41.3% of the 366 projects funded by external sources. Among projects receiving external support, another 12.3% obtained partial funding from an international source along with national funding, while 42.0% relied exclusively on a national source of funding. The

**Table 1. Distribution of external funds of projects, by subregion.**

Subregion	Total \$US	%	Study average
Brazil	10,842,999	40.3	169,422
Mexico	6,340,804	23.6	117,422
Caribbean	6,512,923	24.2	108,549
Andean Region	1,348,871	5.0	30,656
Southern Cone	1,226,300	4.6	23,138
Central America	642,917	2.4	18,369

remaining 4.4% of the projects with external funds did not disclose whether their funding source was national or international.

Projects results were communicated in a variety of ways. About one-fourth of the studies (25.7%) primarily reported their results in abstracts in proceedings of scientific meetings; approximately 8% published articles in national scientific journals, and 4.8% in scientific journals outside LAC. The remainder (60.4%) had not published their studies.

After adjustment for completion of the project the likelihood that a project would publish its results in journals and meetings inside and outside the Region increased if funding was obtained from an international source.

It was also shown that affiliation with an academic institution increased the likelihood that study's results would be published in a scientific journal outside Latin America and the Caribbean. Selection of the sample on the basis of HIV status also increased the likelihood of publication.

The PAHO inventory shows that 64% of all HIV-related research projects describe the magnitude and characteristics of the HIV problem in each country. This pattern is common to epidemiological, clinical and behavioral research areas. Epidemiological description of the problem has been provided by seroprevalence and descriptive studies based on surveillance sources, while the majority of social and behavioral studies have described the KAP of specific groups or the population at large. Finally, most clinical studies have focused on descriptions of HIV-associated clinical manifestations.

This major research effort describing the HIV problem in LAC is a response to the need for basic information in order to initiate the planning of control programs in LAC countries. Such information is vital for determining the magnitude of the epidemic, producing baseline data to measure the efficacy of intervention programs, targeting certain high-risk behaviors for educational intervention, and establishing patterns of clinical manifestations associated with HIV disease. The fact that 73.4% of the projects were started between 2 and 2.5 years before the inventory was conducted corroborates the idea that HIV research in LAC is in its initial stages, and is therefore addressing only the most pressing needs for planning preventive and health care programs.

However, LAC countries must also confront other challenges in HIV research: understanding the virus's pathogenesis and natural history, developing and evaluating preventive strategies, and testing therapies and vaccines. Using broad criteria, 26.7% of the projects would be ranked as research priorities according to the Global Program on AIDS of the World Health Organization. Conversely, following a pattern observed in other developing countries, very few of the projects in LAC address such priority topics as the design and evaluation of HIV preventive interventions, or the impact of HIV infection and care of HIV infected persons. Furthermore, projects addressing vaccine or

drug development issues account for 8% of the projects. Emphasis on the latter area is important, since advances in early diagnosis and clinical management of HIV disease achieved in more developed countries are unaffordable to most people in need of them in LAC.

Because of the wealth of seroprevalence and KAP studies, many of the projects are cross-sectional surveys, and others are small sample clinical case-reviews which have been the traditional form of clinical research in LAC. However, to face the new research challenges in LAC, other study designs are needed.

Continued funding is key to sustaining research efforts in LAC. Total reported expenditure on HIV research in LAC was roughly \$US 27 million for the period 1983-1991. This figure probably underestimates real expenditure since it only takes into account external funding. Nevertheless, it is a small amount compared to the HIV research expenditures in more developed countries. For example, Canada, a country with 10 times fewer reported cumulative AIDS cases than LAC, provided \$US 30 million for HIV research between 1988 and 1991.

In summary, despite some limitations of scientific structures, the results of this study highlight the achievements of HIV research in LAC, nurtured in a rich tradition of health research. The results of this study tell as well of the challenges that lie ahead for HIV research in LAC. Issues such as the efficacy of behavioral and clinical interventions and the natural history of the disease need to be addressed more frequently, using appropriate methodological designs. To respond to these needs, continued funding is required. Although international funding has already provided some support for these efforts, resources devoted to research in LAC countries are meager compared to those of the more developed countries. Similar inequalities in HIV-related scientific production between developing and more developed countries have been documented elsewhere. They should be addressed as yet another facet of health inequalities that the HIV pandemic is producing on a global scale.

(Source: AIDS Program, Division of Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control, PAHO.)

The list of 19 references that document this article is available on request from the AIDS Program, Division of Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control, PAHO, 525 Twenty-third Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037, USA.

## Summer Courses in Epidemiology in North America

*The Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health* is sponsoring the Eleventh Annual Graduate Summer Program in Epidemiology, to be conducted from 21 June to 9 July 1993. The program includes: principles of epidemiology; introduction to biostatistics; methods in epidemiology; intermediate biostatistics; applications of the case-control method; design and conduct of clinical trials; epidemiologic methods for planning and evaluating health services; methods of health risk assessment; cancer risk and prevention; epidemiologic basis for tuberculosis control; epidemiology of AIDS; epidemiologic issues in vaccine use and development; infectious disease epidemiology; nutritional epidemiology; use of microcomputers in epidemiology; communicating to the mass media, and issues in scientific editing and peer reviewing. Proficiency in the English language is required.

Further information is available from Helen Walters, Program Coordinator, Graduate Summer Program in Epidemiology. The Johns Hopkins University, School of Hygiene and Public Health, 615 North Wolfe Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21205. Tel (410) 955-7158; Fax (410) 955-8086.

*Tufts University at Medford, Massachusetts, The New England Epidemiology Institute, and the Post-graduate Medical Institute* are sponsoring the Thirteenth Annual New England Epidemiology Summer Program, to be conducted from 11 to 30 July, 1993. Courses will be offered on the theory and practice of epidemiology, level I and level II; biostatistics for epidemiologists; regression and categorical data methods; logistic regression and survival analysis; conducting epidemiological research; epidemiologic research in developing countries; causal inference; clinical research; the biology and epidemiology of cancer; genetic epidemiology; nutritional epidemiology; perinatal epidemiology; pharmacoepidemiology; epidemiology in public health practice. Proficiency in English is essential.

For more information contact Nancy A. Dreyer, Program Director, The New England Epidemiology Institute, 826 Boylston Street, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts 02167. Tel. (617) 244-1200; Fax (617) 244-9669.

*The University of Michigan School of Public Health* announces the Twenty-eighth International Graduate Summer Session in Epidemiology to be conducted from 11 to 30 July 1993. Three-and-one-week courses will be offered. Three-week courses include: fundamentals

of biostatistics; microcomputer applications in epidemiology; advanced concepts and methods in cancer epidemiology; fundamentals of epidemiology; epidemiological basis for injury control; applied epidemiology for health practitioners. One-week courses include: basic concepts of clinical epidemiology; clinical trials, design and conduct; clinical trials, analytic methods; environmental exposure assessment; occupational epidemiology; environmental epidemiology; pharmacoepidemiology; substance abuse; sexually transmitted diseases and HIV; update in infectious diseases; current issues in infection control; methods in medical quality assessment; analysis of epidemiologic measures; introduction to the logistic model; analysis of survival/follow-up data; nutrition assessment; nutritional epidemiology; nutritional intervention; epidemiology of mental disorders; epidemiology of aging; behavioral modification; epidemiology and health policy; epidemiologic issues in women's health: controversies and challenges; analysis of sample survey data. Proficiency in the English Language is needed.

For further information write to Jody Gray, Administrative Coordinator, Epidemiology Summer Session, Department of Epidemiology, The University of Michigan, School of Public Health, 109 Observatory Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-2029. Tel. (313) 764-5454; Fax (313) 764-3192.

*The Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, McGill University* will hold its Annual Summer Program in Epidemiology/Biostatistics from 3 May to 25 June, 1993. General topics will include: epidemiology: principles and methods; principles of inferential statistics in medicine; principles of epidemiologic research II: data analysis; clinical decision making; infectious and parasitic disease epidemiology; practical aspects of protocol development; health in developing countries; environmental epidemiology; health economics; pharmacoepidemiology: introduction, methods and substantive aspects; selected topics in epidemiology and biostatistics: occupational and environmental lung disease epidemiology; epidemiology of back pain; trauma epidemiology; survival analysis I and II.

For more information contact Elinor J. Masson, Coordinator, Annual Summer Program, Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, McGill University, Purvis Hall, 1020 Pine Avenue West, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, H3A 1A2. Tel. (514) 398-3973; Fax (514) 398-4503.

The Summer Session in Intermediate Epidemiology sponsored by the *Pan American Health Organization*, will be conducted from 2 to 20 August 1993, at the School of Public Health, University of Southern Florida, Tampa, Florida. The courses being offered are: intermediate methods in epidemiology; statistics applied to epidemiology and the use of software packages, and the use of epidemiology in the

programming and evaluation of health services. Students are required to have approved basic training in epidemiology. Courses will be conducted in Spanish.

For more information and application: Carlos Castillo-Salgado, HPC/HCT, Pan American Health Organization, 525 Twenty-third Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037. Tel. (202) 861-3200; Fax (202) 223-5971.

## Cholera in the Americas

Number of cumulative cases and deaths, by country and year, as of 26 March 1993.

Country	First Report	Cumulative cases			Cumulative deaths		
		1991	1992	1993	1991	1992	1993
Peru	23/Jan/91	322,562	212,642	12,374	2,909	727	62
Ecuador	1/Mar/91	46,320	31,870	376	697	208	7
Colombia	10/Mar/91	11,979	15,129	...	207	158	...
United States	9/Apr/91	26	102	5	0	1	...
Brazil	8/Apr/91	2,101	30,054	1,335	26	359	25
Chile	12/Apr/91	41	73	7	2	1	0
Mexico	13/Apr/91	2,690	8,162	157	34	99	3
Guatemala	24/Jul/91	3,674	15,395	631	50	207	4
El Salvador	19/Aug/91	947	8,106	902	34	45	2
Bolivia	26/Aug/91	206	22,260	5,703	12	383	160
Panama	10/Sep/91	1,178	2,416	19	29	49	3
Honduras	13/Oct/91	11	384	11	0	17	1
Nicaragua	12/Nov/91	1	3,067	215	0	46	9
Venezuela	29/Nov/91	13	2,842	15	2	68	2
French Guiana	14/Dec/91	1	16	2	0	0	0
Costa Rica	3/Jan/92	0	12	12	0	0	...
Belize	9/Jan/92	0	159	14	0	4	0
Argentina	5/Feb/92	0	553	1,145	0	15	20
Suriname	6/Mar/92	0	12	...	0	1	...
Guyana	5/Nov/92	0	556	24	0	8	0
Paraguay	25/Jan/93	0	0	2	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>391,750</b>	<b>353,810</b>	<b>22,947</b>	<b>4,002</b>	<b>2,396</b>	<b>298</b>

*During 1992 cholera occurred in 20 countries of the Region, 5 more than had been infected during 1991. The total of 353,810 cases represented 85% of all cases reported to WHO worldwide, though it is probable that there was considerable underreporting in other regions. All but two of the countries infected in 1991 experienced more cases in 1992, in part because in most cholera was present throughout 1992 after its introduction in middle or late 1991. Peru and Ecuador remained the most severely affected countries, with rates of 875 and 287 cases per 100,000 population, respectively, followed by Bolivia with 279 cases per 100,000. Guatemala and El Salvador also had high rates of disease. Heavily affected countries reported disease from all departments or provinces, though particular areas, such as Lima, Peru, and Guayaquil, Ecuador, suffered large or prolonged outbreaks. In many countries, rural areas were as affected as urban areas. While the number of cholera cases and geographical areas affected was high in 1992, there was clear evidence that the rate of spread of disease declined, especially in the second half of the year. There were several reports of decreases in the incidence of other diarrheal diseases, such as typhoid, as a result of control measures undertaken to prevent cholera. None of the island countries and territories of the Caribbean were infected with cholera.*

*Only 2,396 deaths from cholera were reported, giving a case fatality ratio of 0.7%, below the rate of 1.0% in 1991. However, if one excludes Peru, which accounted for a third of all deaths but nearly 60% of all cases, the case fatality ratio in 1992 was 1.2%. Five countries had ratios of 2% or higher.*

*Cholera remains a serious threat to the Region and will undoubtedly be epidemic in several countries during 1993 and subsequent years. Every effort must be made not to become complacent about and accept the presence of cholera in the Region but to undertake coordinated and vigorous efforts towards its elimination.*

# Central American Subregional Meeting on Theory and Practice of Public Health

*The PAHO/WHO project on the development of theory and practice of public health in the Americas (PAHO's Epidemiological Bulletin, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1991), provides, inter alia, for meetings of experts, advisory groups, or workshops to examine the subject and address it at the Regional, subregional, national, or institutional level. It also provides for promotion and support to ensure inclusion of the subject on the agenda in various appropriate forums. These provisions are designed to increase scientific and political awareness about the current status of public health, to target the Region's initiatives in this regard more precisely and appropriately, and to move forward in the definition of strategies aimed at dealing with problem areas and filling in the theoretical, methodological, and operational gaps.*

The Subregional Meeting held in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, from 29 to 31 October 1992, attempted to achieve a level of consolidation that would afford a clearer appreciation of the weaknesses, strengths, gaps, and potential opportunities existing in Central America in this social area. It was attended by health service professionals, researchers, and educators from the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama, as well as representatives of PAHO/WHO (Program on Health Training for Central America and Panama, Costa Rica, and from Honduras and Washington, DC). It is hoped that its results will help to facilitate, on the one hand, greater discussion about and strengthening of public health practice, and, on the other hand, initiatives to deal with areas that are critically in need of development.

During the meeting a variety of contrasting experiences and opinions were aired that made it possible to have a closer look at the subject of the meeting--namely, theory and practice of public health from various complementary and not mutually exclusive perspectives. These included: the perspective of the university, which sees public health as an area of professional training; that of the services, in which public health is regarded as a mission of the state and its institutions; and the broader perspective, according to which it is seen as a series of efforts designed to achieve the health ideals of the Central American people.

To give direction to the working agenda, five subject areas, all of them considered critical, were identified:

- Public health situation and trends in the Central American Subregion.
- The theory and practice of public health in the health services.
- Social participation and health development.
- Research and construction of the theory and practice of public health.
- Education and the democratization of knowledge in public health.

Each of these subject areas was addressed in the plenary sessions. Following a brief introduction of the topic, in each case one of the participants led the group and encouraged the others to react, debate the issues, and examine their own role. This format was

interspersed with individual exercises aimed at synthesizing the process based on guidelines that had been provided. The individual exercises were then consolidated by the general rapporteur into an overview of the current situation and trends in public health. In addition, the proposed strategies were consolidated into a single group document.

## Public Health Situation and Trends in the Subregion

At first the views about the crisis were polarized: some saw it as an overall expression of the current economic and social model, while others regarded it as an internal public health problem. The various interventions led to the recognition that indeed there is a public health crisis due to causes at the macrostructural level created by political and economic factors that affect the health situation, but that at the same time this crisis is also being aggravated by elements inherent in the historical and social process of health--not only elements that are subject to change but also new elements that may emerge both in the institutional and sectoral dimension and also in the demographic and social dimension.

The term *crisis* has been understood as a dialectic concept--in other words as a historical situation that generates and/or complicates problems, and also as a dynamic situation that calls for proposals and new alternatives with a view to the future. In this context, questions were raised which contribute to a redefinition of public health.

The discussions focused on the local level, reaffirming its role in the institutional practice of public health--in other words, in the health of the people. It is at this level, based on policies for comprehensive local development, that health should be seen as an essential component with links to various social actors. It is at this level that the need to break down institutional rigidity and the need for innovative concepts and health practices makes it essential to recapture the intrinsic dynamics of the local situation and take it beyond the bounds of the health sector.

There are other health aspects that have an impact at the level of the people. These are the same elements contributing to the crisis which, when seen from the periphery as opposed to the center, make for two entirely different outlooks which have to be understood and

reconciled. In the framework of the prevailing model of development in the Subregion, in which the economic rationale is dominant, the crisis of public health's social role is reflected in the devaluation of health as a right of the people.

For the participants, the constants that characterize the current situation of public health in the subregion are:

- Limited leadership capacity on the part of those who have traditionally been responsible for health in the countries.
- Increasing disparities between health theory, health practice, and the health needs of the population.
- Lack of capacity to analyze the situation.
- A weak economy and precarious health financing.
- Limited capacity of research in health and public health to solve problems and propose alternatives.

In addition, four trends were recognized that will make for basic changes in public health theory and practice:

- Privatization of the services and public health financing.
- Strengthening of the processes of centralization- decentralization.
- Strengthening of social participation within the framework of a growing process of democratization.
- Implementation and development of a process of comprehensive health care.

### Possibilities and Options to be Created

The following changes were identified as being necessary, essential, and desirable in order to create the desired image-objective of theory and practice of public health in the Subregion:

- Reduction of the gaps between theory and practice, and between education, the services, and the population.
- Organization of health services within a framework of quality, productivity, and equity.
- Development and democratization of knowledge and epidemiological practice.
- Reconstruction of public health theory and practice based on the problems of life and health that are generated as part of the social dynamic of populations.

- Finally, several elements were defined that should be inherent in any Regional, subregional, national, or local project that seeks to deepen and democratize the debate on public health theory and practice in the context of the structural crisis being experienced in the Region, with a view to keeping projects focused on the improvement of living conditions and the health situation of the population.
- Incorporation, in both the discussion and the practice of national and international health institutions, the importance of health as a right of the people which is indispensable for their development.
- Strengthening of interagency technical and financial support for the processes of reorganization and leadership in the health services.
- Assurance that reorganization of the services will be directed toward equity, effectiveness, quality, and productivity.
- Strengthening of human resources development as a fundamental condition for creation of the new public health practice.
- Implementation of the processes of democratization and social participation in evolution--mechanisms that will make it possible to create a national health undertaking that is truly social.
- Promotion of the administrative development of knowledge to ensure ongoing communication between and within all the countries of the Region and between actors in and outside governments that will make it possible to build Latin American collective thinking in the area of public health.
- Assurance of structural and organizational flexibility in the focus of technical cooperation agencies so that their practice is consistent with a comprehensive approach to health problems.
- Development of leadership and a strategic attitude on the part of health workers in order to ensure the transformation of public health theory and practice.

(Source: Health Manpower Development Program, PAHO.)

A copy of the full report of the meeting may be requested from the PAHO/WHO Representation in Honduras or from PAHO/WHO in Washington, DC.

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PAHO's *Epidemiological Bulletin* is published quarterly in English and Spanish.  
Catalogued and indexed by the United States National Library of Medicine.  
Printed on acid-free paper.



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