

REGIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION
HELD IN NEW GUINEA
ON 5TH SEPTEMBER, 1963

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies

Sir, Distinguished Representatives of your various Countries,
 Ladies and Gentlemen :

My colleague, Senator Wade, rather glorifies me this morning. He attributes my presence entirely to virtue on my part. I would like to tell you that the last time I was here, though not in this building, they did their best to kill me. (Laughter) They cooked me, they cooked me, they cooked me, they ran me around and I agreed to come this time on strict condition that the weather would be better. (Laughter) And so it is. So it is not only a matter of pure virtue but of personal comfort.

Sir, the Constitution of the World Health Organisation not only contains those splendid words that were quoted by my colleague, but they also contain a definition of health, and I read this with great interest. They describe "health" as a state of complete mental, physical and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. I think most of us must be rather unhealthy. "A state of complete mental, physical and social well-being" Well, give those words an extensive interpretation and they will cover almost all of the material problems of mankind today and therefore they would tend to defeat themselves. But what I like about the work of the W.H.O is that it has not lost itself in generalisation; it has rather concentrated its mind upon the proposition that health in the nations and among the people does not represent merely the absence of disease but includes these great activities to which my colleague has referred. In brief, the World Health Organisation has not been just academic in its approach to problems. On every occasion, it has sought to give a practical application to the work of medical scientists and discoverers and to give that practical application in particular places for particular purposes.

I was informed before I came here that 100 health projects had been assisted by the World Health Organisation in the Western Pacific - 100 different and specific projects. Now, Sir, having said that to indicate that I do understand the essentially practical purposes that you have, I perhaps ought to remind those of us who are not medical men that it is a pretty modern idea that public health problems are capable of solution. I don't think that people troubled much about public health problems, as we understand them, a couple of centuries ago. In Great Britain the eighteenth century has become known as the century of good taste, and indeed it was in many ways, but it must have produced many bad tastes in its fashion because public health, as we understand it, was entirely unknown and indeed the practice of medicine in any of its forms was extraordinarily primitive.

Indeed, one has only to go back to the middle of the nineteenth century - a period which was well remembered by people like my own parents, so that we are not so far removed from the middle of the nineteenth century. Up to that time when the Red Cross was created, when the great figure and genius of Florence Nightingale became known nursing as we understand it, treatment of the wounded, as we understand it, was almost entirely unknown. For the most part in the dreadful occurrences of war, the wounded were left to die; casualties which turned out to be fatal

casualties were enormous compared to what they would be under similar circumstances today. And it was a good long time after that before it was realised by the hard economic elements in the community that disease is economically wasteful, that no country can afford to have any disease which skill and effort can avert, that economically this wastage of the economic contribution made by the individual is not to be tolerated. That is a very modern idea.

And so we have entered what we are pleased to believe to be the modern and enlightened era of which the World Health Organisation is a manifestation, with 115 members and a record of immense vigour and practical quality. But Sir, the health work of the modern world and the health work of the W.H.O. can't be done in a vacuum, they can't be done extra-territorially. What we all need to do, what you have shown you understand you must do, is to get down to cases, not to be too abstract, not to regard any problem as being capable of being solved in an office or a lab. somewhere else in the world.

And, therefore, as I understand the W.H.O., its main function is to stimulate activity in specific areas and to a great extent in relation to specific diseases of great endemic or epidemic proportions. Your topic for this Conference is an illustration of this fact, and when you have a conference you are not merely engaging in a series of abstract remarks, you are concentrating your attention on a particular problem and pooling experience and skill, as it turns out here, from thirteen or fourteen different countries.

Now Sir, you happen to be in Australian territory and I happen to be, by the grace of the electors of Australia, though only narrowly (Laughter), the Prime Minister. Now, in these Territories - Papua and New Guinea - we in Australia have accepted great responsibilities, responsibilities much too great to be cast off our shoulders light-heartedly or in a spirit of pure theory. We have immense responsibilities in these Territories and we propose, of course, to discharge them. We look forward to the time when these Territories, the people of these Territories will be completely politically and economically independent, when they will be a living vital country controlling their own destiny. This is the great objective of intelligent people in the twentieth century. But in the meantime, we, the Government of Australia, have tremendous responsibilities and we will carry them forward to a conclusion, not slowly, not in a wild hurry, always with the understanding that the paramount consideration is the welfare of the people of the Territories and not a mere desire to satisfy somebody else.

Now, this is a health organisation conference and therefore I should tell you that in the pursuit of this duty to which I have referred, the Administration, while very far from satisfied - none of us can afford to be satisfied; if you were satisfied about the state of health in the world, you wouldn't be here; this is something about which you will never get satisfaction -- and therefore the Administration is not satisfied, but I venture to say that it can be very properly proud of what has been done, remembering always that these Territories embrace hundreds of different types of peoples, literally hundreds of different languages, stages of civilisation or of uncivilisation which are perhaps not to be found very easily in any other part of the world, ranging from what you see around you in Port Moresby to what we might see if we had the time and took the trouble and had the endurance to go into some of the more remote parts of Papua and New Guinea. This is a tremendously difficult place and

yet, I repeat, the Administration may be very proud of what has been done.

So far as we have been able to discover, there was simply no evidence of any established medical system in this great tract of country until European settlement first occurred. The indigenous inhabitants, as was not uncommon perhaps at that stage in the world's history, believed that disease was a product of some mysterious force, perhaps a sorcerer, perhaps some form of witchcraft. There were rather obscure, almost instinctive and superstitious ideas about how illness came about and how it ought to be dealt with. In other words, there was a state of affairs here, only a decade - three, four decades ago, five decades ago - which strongly resembled the state of affairs which existed in a great number of our countries hundreds and hundreds of years ago, so that the task was a difficult one and had to be concentrated into a fairly short period of time.

Well, by 1923 - that's only forty years ago - there were in these Territories 14 hospitals and 13 medical officers. No great matter was it? Fourteen hospitals, 13 medical officers represented an enormous improvement on what had been but it was still no great matter. Then the progress that followed was interrupted by war because this country saw war and saw it in a destructive form. I've been reminded that the war destroyed every hospital except those at Port Moresby and at Samarai. Here is a splendid example, if that is the right word to choose, of the destruction that war can bring about. Only two hospitals left standing. But, of course, the war also, by the strange irony of fate or the not-always-understood wisdom of Providence, brought great advances in medicine with the anti-malarials and the insecticides and the anti-biotics and the vaccines. I suppose that two of the remarkable effects of the war were that in medical science the discovery of how to fight disease was accelerated beyond words while, at the same time, in the world of the physicist, we saw results following upon the splitting of the atom which have, up to now, rather increased the apprehensions of mankind but may, in due course, properly understood, add enormously to its resources. So there was a plus; there was a minus.

Well, Sir, when the war was over the Administration resumed and has pressed on with increasing activity ever since. Great territory-wide campaigns by 1957 were being waged against yaws, against T.B., against malaria, leprosy, there was an increasing medical examination of schoolchildren and, after all, it isn't so long since there were hardly any schoolchildren because there were hardly any schools. This has been a tremendous development that I don't take time to speak of this morning, but there has been, over this period, an increasing medical examination of schoolchildren and a dental health service.

In 1962/63, the last financial year, there was an extensive procurement of vaccine against what? Very interesting to recall the diseases that were being attacked.Against tetanus, against whooping-cough, which in some of our countries is regarded sometimes as a sort of juvenile eccentricity, regarded with indifference by husbands and causing immense trouble for wives, but still, whooping cough in a country not so well developed can be a dread disease, and it was attacked.Diphtheria, poliomyelitis, smallpox, cholera, T.B., all these things being attacked by the procurement and use of vaccines with tremendous personal work being done by regular health patrols and, of course, by the improvement of nutrition.

I said then "by regular health patrols". If you look at the relief map out in the foyer outside, somewhat exaggerated

no doubt for purposes of demonstration, you will realise that this is, in many respects, a tremendously mountainous country, with here and there a road, with here and there a track, but for the most part presenting the most tremendous difficulties of access. Therefore, perhaps, enabling more and more small communities in small valleys or in remote corners to be suffering from some disease, to be almost extinguishing themselves without access from the people who might be able to help them. And if anybody ought to go down in history here with immense fame, it is the people who have gone out on patrol, who have put up with all these hardships, who have reached these inaccessible places in order to bring medical health and apply medical resources to the needs of the country. That goes indeed in Papua and New Guinea for almost all the activities of administration. We are living in an age in which, to bring the ordinary instruments of peace and progress and benefit to people, requires immense personal courage on the part of hundreds and hundreds of young men out on the trail.

Now, Sir, I hesitate to speak about money because I find that sums of money that I think are quite big are regarded by my opponents as trivial. But I think that I should say that health services, as you all know, are costly. Indeed, it is because you realise that that you have these regular meetings in order to produce more and more efficacy in the treatment of disease, because the more efficient, then the more justified is the expenditure of money. Now, since 1953, that's ten years ago, the health services in these countries have cost us £33M. I had forgotten to add up the figures. All I remembered in a hazy way was that my colleague and friend, Mr. Hasluck, who is the Minister for Territories in my Government, has a very beguiling way of getting more money for the Territories than the rest of us at first thought proper and, looking back on it, there it is - £33M. In the last financial year which closed only the other day, £5M on health services - that amounts to 50/- per head of the population, and to all that you must add in these Territories, the immense work, the devoted skilled work of mission medical workers.

So that you will see, just at a glance, that what has been done here has really been done generously, enthusiastically, and of course, when I say that, I am the first one to realise that what looks like a big figure this year will look like a fairly small and comfortable one before we are another five years older.

If you add together the work of the Administration here and the work of the missions - and this is the last fact I want to put before you - if you add those two together, and you have in mind that after this last war there were two hospitals left standing, a mere handful of medical people immediately available, and then listen when I tell you that in June of this year there were 100 Government hospitals - 100 - and a very large number which I don't have by me of mission hospitals, there were 528 maternity and child welfare centres, there were 1,693 aid posts or medical centres - 1,693 - there were 148 doctors and there were 4,400 other medical personnel - all this on June 30, 1963 - and you will see that you have come here representing all your talent, devotion, experience to a country which affords a splendid example of an Administration with the co-operation of the people, going forward along the lines that you have been so much concerned with, bringing to the people a new chance of prolonged life, higher medical standards, better living, a better future, taking them out of the primitive and superstitious

darkness before the medical era and giving them the benefit of the best that the world can provide. This, in other words, is a great experimental area in the world and I am delighted that you should have come here in order to bring your minds together on a disease well known in these Territories so that the sum of knowledge may be added to, so that the enthusiasm of those on the spot here will be refreshed, so that our determination to go forward may be made stronger and it is in that spirit and having in mind all these things that I welcome you on behalf of the Government of Australia and I have pleasure in declaring your Conference open.
