

PREFACE

Not long ago, during the Second Mexican Congress on Public Health, held at the National Medical Center in Mexico City, visiting public health authorities and doctors from Europe, the United States, and South America paid enthusiastic tribute to the recent achievements of the Mexican Department of Public Health and Assistance.

These achievements, unquestionably impressive, included the eradication, by means of intensive nationwide campaigns, of several epidemic and endemic diseases which for centuries had plagued the population. And they included the swift construction of not only the Medical Center complex of auditoriums, research laboratories, and specialized hospitals with the latest and costliest equipment (including betatrons), but a coast-to-coast network of modern clinics, hospitals, and health centers, to bring basic medical care to the country's lowest economic levels in their home environments.

However, concurrent with all the reports and evidence of such forward strides at the Public Health Congress, across the city at the internationally known National Institute of Tropical Diseases the director was hearing an all-too-familiar tale of obstructionism: The chief of a mobile medical brigade which had just returned from the jungles of Chiapas, in Southern Mexico, was reporting on the slow progress of the campaign there to stamp out blindness-producing onchocercosis. He was describing the latest sabotaging tactics being employed against the vital work of the brigade by the *brujos*, or "witch doctors," among the primitive Indians indigenous to the region.

Such paradoxical contrasts are commonplace in the operations of

Mexico's Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia, or Department of Public Health and Assistance. They indicate the problems posed by the vast cultural variations—in terms of civilization measurable only by millenia—existing among the millions of recipients of the Department's attention.

Mexico had a "Public Health Administration" operating under the Spaniards, almost a century before the Pilgrims first set foot on Plymouth Rock. Furthermore, beginning some two thousand years before the Colonial period, the Olmecs, Totonacs, Mayas, Zapotecs, Toltecs, and eventually the Aztecs—with civilizations in Southern and Central Mexico comparable to those of ancient Egypt, Babylonia, and China—were administering public health programs that, for their times, evidenced some amazing realization of health fundamentals.

The pursuit of an optimum level of well-being by the successive dominant inhabitants of Mexico makes an extraordinarily engrossing story. For flamboyance, sweep, and drama it overshadows anything invented by Hollywood's moguls of the wide-screen epic.

In addition, the record of medicine and public health administration in Mexico has a special importance in our swiftly evolving world. Having achieved political stability with an enlightened government, under a constitution based on social and economic justice for all, Mexico in a few short years has become a leader, and a model, for all Latin America in the fields of medicine, public health, and welfare, especially in rural areas.

Moreover, Mexico's advances in these fields are of world-wide significance today: They demonstrate concretely, to all emerging and developing nations, what can be achieved by a progressive-minded government and its people, in a brief span of time, toward attaining the universal goal of a high level of life and health for all the population.

G.S.