

W.O.N.C.A. 1974

The sixth conference of the World Organisation of National Colleges and Academies of General Practice (WONCA) was held in Mexico City in November 1974 and, for those who joined the group which met at Heathrow, it was to be the first acquaintance with a country which, while geographically in the northern hemisphere, considers itself to be a part of South America. The contingent from our College was joined by colleagues from Austria, Holland, Israel, and Norway.

Our introduction to the western world convinced us that the airport transit lounge at Houston had not yet entered the space age, whatever advances had been made elsewhere in the city, and the last leg of the flight to Mexico City itself was welcome. The usual routines followed, the unsteady stumble into dimly lit buses, excessive concern over luggage, excessive tips to porters, and a travel agent whose cheerfulness was just at that moment a little depressing. Comfortable hotels received us and for most there was a long sound sleep to counteract the seven-hour change in time zones.

The group dispersed more or less at once for a few free days in the new country, some moving on to Acapulco for its bright lights and beaches, others flying south to the Yucatan peninsula to visit the archaeological sites which remain as relics of the Mayan and Toltec civilisations. These were fascinating not only in the work and workmanship which they represented, but also in the speculations which were aroused as to what happened to the people, and their civilisation, whose lives revolved around the immense structures of Chichen Itza and Ixmal. We were told that no clear cause had been established, the possibilities including sudden environmental change with dropping of the water table in the limestone, internal war, or even disease—a genocidal epidemic.

Those who had expected steaming rain-forests were disillusioned to find wide plains with jungles of modest height and fields of sisal under cultivation and harvested by hand. There was mechanisation at one processing centre where the fibre was cleaned and dried, but the ruined shells of large haciendas, the manor houses of the old estates, each with its furnace chimney, suggested more intensive industry in the past. The roads were excellent, the traffic here, as apparently throughout Mexico, terrifyingly fast, and we soon got used to the vultures circling endlessly overhead, sometimes roosting on the lamp standards outside the hotel windows.

WONCA Council

On returning to Mexico City some were at once involved in the work of WONCA Council. Hard work it was, with an agenda which had been built up over the past two years. Discussions ranged from the needs that an international organisation for general practice might have to meet, to ways in which it might meet them. As reported to the General Assembly later, it was decided to form an organisation with elements of regionalisation.

All agreed that an effective communications system was essential for only through this could WONCA help less experienced countries to share the knowledge of educational methods and research techniques which has been developed by the countries who have been longest in the business. Among other forward-planning decisions were that the 1978 conference would be held at Montreux and that Dr Stuart Carne, Chairman of the Finance Committee of WONCA Council, should be President-Elect.

The Congress itself was held at the Centro Medico of the Instituto Mexicana del Seguro Social, in the south of the city. The huge auditorium, with full simultaneous translation services from Spanish into English and French, accommodated nearly 3,000 delegates, visitors and their wives. After a formal opening on behalf of President Echeverria there was a full programme of free papers and plenary sessions with speakers and participants from the host country and those of all the visitors. Dr H. W. K. Acheson, an official representative of the College, took the chair at a plenary session devoted to the professional formation of the family physician. Dr S. J.

Carne, the other official representative, presented a paper on the part played by drug addiction, sex, and violence in family disintegration.

Research

In parallel with the delivery of papers there was a series of working party meetings where matters which had been considered during the past two years were brought to decision. Two of these working parties were concerned with aspects of research. The first, convened by Dr Robert Westbury, of Canada, burned midnight oil to effect the synthesis of a number of existing systems of classification of diagnoses into a new version to be introduced by WONCA and recommended for use in general practice throughout the world. A review and account of this new classification, which owes much to the series of classifications devised by our College, will be published in the *Journal* later.

A second working party convened by Dr R. J. F. H. Pinsent agreed to recommend the setting up of a standing Research Committee for WONCA and elected Dr W. H. A. Falk, Canada, an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of General Practitioners, as its first Chairman. There was a sense of *deJà vu* in the air for the circumstances much resembled those under which our own Research Committee came into being. The decision was ratified by the General Assembly and the new Committee's terms of reference confirmed. Work can now start.

Those who had time to see the sights of Mexico City had first to adjust to its decibel level for even in wide streets and avenues the traffic noise was intense. Almost every aspect of life seemed to be accompanied by cacophony beyond the experience of most of us. One quiet place was the Museum of Anthropology which must surely be unique among the museums of the world. Its presentation of the many phases of pre-Columbian and post-Columbian history was clear even to those whose knowledge of Spanish was minimal. Those attending the conference were taken to the Ballet Folklorico of Mexico, a memorable evening of colour, sound, and movement based not on the traditional ballet of Europe, but on the history and legend of Mexico itself.

When the time came to rejoin Air France for the journey home all those in the group were, perhaps because of the unaccustomed altitude, rather tired. Some had encountered medical problems locally known as 'Montezuma's revenge'—all had tales of interest to tell. None had failed to succumb to the lure of the shops and more items of luggage were checked in for the return journey than had come out. To nobody's surprise the trophies included one guitar and a number of hats with very, very wide brims.

The future

WONCA will now settle down to another two years of quiet unpublicised progress. It has found confidence that it has a role to play in advancing many aspects of primary health care throughout the world, and is prepared to move ahead slowly and steadily. Its activities will in no way interfere with regional groupings of other and non-collegiate medical societies and bodies. Instead these will come to find that WONCA can provide the means by which one group can make contact with others just as it will enable new links to develop between individual countries. In competition with no one, it is prepared to collaborate with and help other bodies which share its goals and objectives as far as its resources will permit.

The seventh conference is to be held in Toronto in 1976. New progress will be reported and new problems will be worked on in an entirely different setting, but one no less appropriate to this exciting venture than the city to which some of us have just been introduced.
