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**EXPERT COMMITTEE  
ON HEALTH STATISTICS**

**Report on the First Session**

*Geneva, 23-28 May 1949*

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WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION  
PALAIS DES NATIONS  
GENEVA  
MARCH 1950

## EXPERT COMMITTEE ON HEALTH STATISTICS

### First Session

#### *Members :*

- Dr D. Curiel, Chief, Division of Epidemiology and Vital Statistics, Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, Caracas, Venezuela  
Dr P. F. Denoix, Chef des Services techniques et de la Section du Cancer, Institut national d'Hygiène, Paris, France  
Dr H. L. Dunn, Chief, National Office of Vital Statistics (US Public Health Service), Washington, D.C., USA  
Dr M. Kacprzak, Professor of Hygiene, Director, State School of Hygiene, Warsaw, Poland (*Chairman*)  
Dr P. Stocks, Chief Medical Statistician, General Register Office of England and Wales, London, United Kingdom

#### *Co-opted Members :*

- Julia E. Backer, Sc.D., Chief, Demographic Section, Central Statistical Office, Oslo, Norway  
\*Professor M. Greenwood, Professor Emeritus of Epidemiology and Vital Statistics, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, United Kingdom  
Professeur L. Hersch, Professeur de Démographie à l'Université de Genève, Switzerland  
\*J. T. Marshall, Assistant Dominion Statistician, Ottawa, Canada  
Professor J. Rasuhin, Professor of Social Medicine, University of Zagreb, Yugoslavia  
\*Professor L. J. Reed, Chairman, US National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics; Department of Biostatistics, School of Hygiene and Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md., USA

#### *Observers :*

##### FAO :

- Dr J. Latsky, Nutrition Representative in Europe

##### ILO :

- Miss L. E. Bodmer, Social Security Section  
Dr A. Grut, Chief, Industrial Hygiene Section  
Dr M. de Viado, Social Security Section

#### *Secretariat :*

- Dr M. Pascua, Chief, Health Statistics Section, WHO (*Secretary*)  
Dr Marie Cakrtova, Medical Officer, Health Statistics Section, WHO  
B. Grab, Research Assistant, Health Statistics Section, WHO

The report on the first session of this committee was originally issued in mimeographed form as document WHO/HS/19, 31 May 1949.

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\* Indicates members unable to attend.

## EXPERT COMMITTEE ON HEALTH STATISTICS

### Report on the First Session<sup>1</sup>

The Expert Committee on Health Statistics was established, on the recommendation of the Committee on Programme, by a resolution of the First World Health Assembly at its fourteenth plenary meeting.<sup>2</sup>

The committee held its first session in Geneva from 23 to 28 May 1949.

In addition to members, co-opted members, and representatives of specialized agencies, Professor J. Heyman, Radiumhemmet, Stockholm, assisted at the discussion on cancer statistics.

#### 1. National Committees on Health Statistics

The committee, after discussing at length this important subject, unanimously agreed on the following resolution :

The Expert Committee on Health Statistics,  
considering

(1) that the International Conference for the Sixth Decennial Revision of the International Lists of Diseases and Causes of Death, held in Paris from 26 to 30 April 1948, strongly recommended that the various governments of the world establish national committees on vital and health statistics and that the study of some of the many statistical problems in the field of health be decentralized to them ;<sup>3</sup>

(2) that the First World Health Assembly, held in Geneva during July 1948, endorsed this recommendation<sup>4</sup> and that the World Health Organization subsequently requested the Member Governments to create such committees ;

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<sup>1</sup> The Executive Board, at its fourth session, adopted the following resolution :  
The Executive Board

(1) NOTES the report of the Expert Committee on Health Statistics on its first session, and

(2) AUTHORIZES its publication. *Off. Rec. World Hlth Org.* 22, 3

<sup>2</sup> *Off. Rec. World Hlth Org.* 13, 97, 304

<sup>3</sup> *Off. Rec. World Hlth Org.* 11, 25

<sup>4</sup> *Off. Rec. World Hlth Org.* 13, 97, 304

- (3) that several nations have responded to this request and have set up national committees, and that a number of other nations are now in the process of organizing national committees or equivalent bodies ;
- (4) that these national committees are expected to report their findings and recommendations, from time to time, to the WHO Expert Committee on Health Statistics “ for international consideration, clearance of national viewpoints and co-ordination with the interested statistical services of other intergovernmental organizations ” ;<sup>5</sup>

## RECOMMENDS

- (1) that WHO renew its efforts, through normal channels, to foster the creation of national committees to suit their particular needs in the field of medical and public-health statistics ;
- (2) that WHO issue an informative document setting forth the motives and background for the establishment of national committees on vital and health statistics, emphasizing their objectives, suggesting problems which might need solution, and reporting on the present status of those national committees already organized ;
- (3) that this document be amply supplied to governments for distribution to interested national organizations, and supplied also to those national committees (or their equivalents) already in operation ;
- (4) that a focal unit for maintaining relationship with national committees (or their equivalents) be established in the WHO Secretariat, this to include :
- (a) an exchange service for national committees, reporting on their work and supplying information which might be of value to them, and
  - (b) a consulting staff adequately provided with funds for travel and other necessary expenses so as to enable them to assist national committees in their programmes, this staff to include not only WHO officers, but also specially qualified consultants who will assist such a national committee, other than their own, which may ask for their help—the duration and the character of this aid and the methods to be followed shall be established by agreement between WHO and the interested parties ;
- (5) that WHO should initiate an international conference of representatives of national committees to be sent at the expense of their respective governments, this meeting to be held early in 1952.

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<sup>5</sup> Resolution No. 9, Point 8, Paris Revision Conference. *Off. Rec. World Hlth Org.* 11, 30

## 2. Medical Certification and Classification of Causes of Death

The subjects considered under this heading were amply discussed by the committee and the following resolutions were approved :

I. The Expert Committee on Health Statistics,  
considering

- (1) that in fulfilment of a statutory obligation WHO published the *Manual of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases, Injuries, and Causes of Death* ;<sup>6</sup>
- (2) that the First World Health Assembly adopted " World Health Organization Regulations No. 1 " laying down the principles of applying the said *Manual* in the compilation and publication of statistics of sickness and causes of death ;<sup>7</sup>
- (3) that countries which are using or planning to use the said *Manual* face many complex problems in :
  - (a) obtaining proper medical certification,
  - (b) interpreting the classification and rules for coding given in the *Manual*,
  - (c) training the coding personnel in the use of the *Manual* ;

### RECOMMENDS

- (1) that WHO prepare, on the basis of the experience available in certain countries, a short informative booklet elaborating and illustrating the provisions already made in the *Manual* ;
- (2) that WHO stimulate the exchange between nations of information relating to methods of improving medical certification, of applying the classification, and of training personnel in the use of the *Manual* ;
- (3) that WHO set up within its Secretariat a clearing centre for problems arising in the application of the *Manual*, including arrangements for the use of such national skills as might be necessary to supplement those available in the WHO Secretariat.

II. The Expert Committee on Health Statistics,  
having considered the application of the rules for classification set out in the *Manual*,

REAFFIRMS its opinion that exceptions to the general rules should be minimized and that, in cases of doubt as to whether one of the exceptions is applicable, the general rules should be followed.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> 2 vols. Geneva, 1948-49 (*Supplement 1 to Bull. World Hlth Org.*)

<sup>7</sup> *Off. Rec. World Hlth Org.* 13, 349

<sup>8</sup> This resolution was inadvertently omitted from the mimeographed version submitted to the Executive Board.

### 3. Definition of Stillbirth and Abortion

Several aspects of the important problem of the diversity of stillbirth definitions in use in the different countries were also studied by the committee, and the following resolution was agreed upon :

The Expert Committee on Health Statistics

REQUESTS the designation of a temporary subcommittee on the definition of stillbirth and abortion.

It is felt that this subcommittee might function most economically and effectively if it could hold its meetings in the USA so as to obtain (without expense to WHO) the advice of a number of US experts in allied fields, and that the subcommittee should include one member from the USA, two or three experts on the subject from other countries, and a member of the Expert Committee on Health Statistics.<sup>9</sup>

### 4. Epidemiological Statistical Publications

#### 4.1 Publications recommended

The committee, having considered, as requested by the Executive Board at its third session,<sup>10</sup> the existing epidemiological publications of WHO and the plans for complementing them,<sup>11</sup> endorsed the regular publication of :

4.1.1 a weekly periodical on pestilential diseases, for quarantine purposes (*Weekly Epidemiological Record*) ;

4.1.2 a monthly periodical containing provisional data on communicable diseases and vital statistics, for the current general information of health administrations (*Epidemiological and Vital Statistics Report*) ;

4.1.3 an annual volume of corrected and completed figures on the same subjects for reference and research (*Annual Epidemiological and Vital Statistics*).

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<sup>9</sup> The Executive Board, at its fourth session, adopted the following resolution :  
The Executive Board

DECIDES to establish as from 1 January 1950... a temporary subcommittee of the Expert Committee on Health Statistics, of not more than five members, to study the question of the definition of stillbirth and abortion... *Off. Rec. World Hlth Org.* 22, 3

<sup>10</sup> *Off. Rec. World Hlth Org.* 17, 15

<sup>11</sup> Unpublished working document WHO/HS/14

4.1.4 The committee agreed also on the desirability of including in a single volume, in a condensed form, the same material covering the whole of the war period (1939-1946).

4.2 *Lack of comparability of existing statistics*

4.2.1 The committee was fully aware that the unequal degree of development of the medical and statistical services throughout the world did not always permit of the collection and publication of reliable, and therefore comparable, health statistics.

4.2.2 It was of the opinion, however, that the international publication of such statistics was of value not only to show the seasonal variation and trend of diseases within the countries, but as a stimulant to improvement.

4.3 *Recommendations relating to the improvement of international comparability*

The committee recommended, to further such improvement and increase the international comparability of national statistics, that

4.3.1 countries be asked to give an estimate of the completeness of their mortality figures and the proportion of deaths which were adequately certified by physicians as to their causes ;

4.3.2 countries unable to provide satisfactory statistics for the whole of their territory, because of lack of physicians and proper administrative machinery for registration and certification of deaths in many areas, be encouraged to provide figures for those towns or areas in which reliable statistics can be compiled (" registration areas ");

4.3.3 countries be asked to indicate the estimated degree of incompleteness of the notifications relating to each of the main communicable diseases ;

4.3.4 countries be encouraged to adopt the week as the normal period for reporting communicable diseases and compiling statistics thereon, in preference to uneven ten-day or monthly periods ;

4.3.5 finally, studies be initiated and actively pursued with a view to developing the international comparability of morbidity statistics.

4.4 *Publication of mortality figures by age and sex*

The committee expressed the view that the publication of rates of mortality for separate causes, such as cancer, without reference to age or sex, gives an unsatisfactory, and in some cases misleading, picture of

the mortality situation. It therefore recommended that WHO publish regularly, if not necessarily every year, figures of mortality by age and sex for the more important diseases, together with corresponding population figures, for countries selected for the accuracy of their statistics.

#### 4.5 *Handbook of health statistics*

The committee recommended that a handbook, or handbooks, be prepared by WHO summarizing the present position in different countries with regard to the collection of health statistics.

#### 4.6 *Uniformity of statistics published by United Nations agencies*

The committee learned with satisfaction of the agreement between the UN and the WHO statistical services, whereby they exchange the statistics collected by them within their respective fields. This avoids overlapping of their activities and ensures identity of the figures published by them.

### 5. Hospital Statistics

The committee amply discussed various aspects of morbidity statistics and adopted the following resolution :

The Expert Committee on Health Statistics

#### RECOMMENDS

- (1) that a subcommittee of the Expert Committee on Health Statistics be set up in order to initiate the proper action to be taken by the committee in the field of hospital statistics, primary attention being given to the application of the new *International Statistical Classification of Diseases, Injuries, and Causes of Death* and related subjects, and appropriate questions being decentralized for study by national committees on health statistics ;<sup>12</sup>
- (2) that WHO prepare an informative document reviewing the subject of definition of morbidity rates in its different aspects, this document to be submitted for consideration of the committee at its next session.

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<sup>12</sup> The Executive Board, at its fourth session, adopted the following resolution :  
The Executive Board

DECIDES to establish as from 1 January 1950 . . . a subcommittee of the Expert Committee on Health Statistics, of not more than six members, to initiate the proper action to be taken by the committee in the field of hospital statistics, primary attention to be given to the application of the new *International Statistical Classification of Diseases, Injuries, and Causes of Death* and related subjects . . . *Off. Rec. World Hlth Org.* 22, 3

## 6. Cancer Statistics

The Expert Committee on Health Statistics,  
considering

- (1) the growing importance of cancer in the world and, in particular, the need for a study on an international scale of the problems of its registration and its statistics ; and
- (2) the fact that the Health Organization of the League of Nations had undertaken this study from the limited viewpoint of cancer of the uterine cervix ;

RECOMMENDS that there should be set up as soon as possible a sub-committee of the Expert Committee on Health Statistics, to be entrusted with the study of problems concerning the registration of cases of cancer as well as their statistical presentation.<sup>13</sup>

(a) Pending the result of this work, the committee proposes that the publication in 1950 of the sixth volume of the *Annual Report on the Results of Radiotherapy in Cancer of the Uterine Cervix*, at present in preparation, should be supported by WHO.

(b) The Subcommittee on Cancer should undertake, in addition to its other duties, a study of the modifications to be made in the presentation of possible future editions of this *Annual Report*, with a view to adapting it to the new conditions of international cancer statistics, which will have been studied by it.

## 7. Health Statistics in Underdeveloped Areas

The Expert Committee on Health Statistics,  
considering the present difficulties in measuring the state of health of underdeveloped areas, the close association between the prevalence of certain parasitic diseases, nutrition and health, and the need to evaluate the effectiveness of projects for improving health and nutrition in such areas,

RECOMMENDS

- (1) that studies be carried out in underdeveloped areas on the available methods of measuring the state of health and the prevalence of disease in such areas, and the possibilities of improving those methods ;

<sup>13</sup> The Executive Board, at its fourth session, adopted the following resolution :

The Executive Board

DECIDES to establish as from 1 January 1950 . . . a subcommittee of the Expert Committee on Health Statistics, of not more than four members, entrusted with the study of problems concerning the registration of cases of cancer as well as their statistical presentation. *Off. Rec. World Hlth Org.* 22, 4

(2) that such studies be initiated by conferences, within the region concerned, between specialists or qualified representatives of the areas and one or more experts on health statistics from WHO ;

(3) that, when projects for improving health conditions of under-developed areas are initiated, proper arrangements be made in advance, by the competent statistical advisory committees of the international agencies concerned, to collect such vital statistics as may be possible throughout the period of the work, with a view to assessing the improvement in health which actually results from carrying out the projects.

#### **8. Teaching of Health Statistics and Training of Personnel in Health Statistics**

The committee devoted a great deal of its time to the consideration of this item of the agenda, and notes on this subject, presented by Professors Greenwood<sup>14</sup> and Reed,<sup>15</sup> were carefully examined. The following resolution was adopted :

The Expert Committee on Health Statistics, considering the increasing need for accurate recording of data connected with health and disease, their proper analysis and presentation, and drawing correct conclusions therefrom,

EMPHASIZES the importance of

(1) teaching medical recording procedure and elementary statistical methodology to all medical students, preferably in the second and third years of their training ;

(2) teaching more advanced statistical methodology and vital statistics to medical and other graduates who are training for public-health posts ;

(3) instruction in the groundwork of medical statistics for non-medical personnel engaged in medical coding, keeping records, and preparing statistics in public-health offices, hospitals, social security institutions, and government departments concerned.

#### **9. Statistical Appraisal of Results of Researches and Experiences Made under WHO Programmes**

The Expert Committee on Health Statistics notes that a number of programmes undertaken under the auspices of WHO will, of necessity, involve the collection and analysis of pertinent statistics. It therefore recommends that, when WHO plans to ask this committee to review and evaluate statistical methods and results of such projects or programmes, it shall likewise consult the committee during the stage of planning.

<sup>14</sup> Unpublished working document WHO/HS/5

<sup>15</sup> Unpublished communication

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