With the severe financial crisis that swept across Mexico, the decade of the 80s proved almost fatal to the country's medical research and its system of public health care. A system that was remarkable for its scope and its social purpose. Fortunately, Mexican researchers have regained their optimism, with the support of decision makers and the political system. IDRC could hardly hope for a more favourable opportunity to assist in the development of a plan for Essential National Health Research (ENHR).

This initiative flows from a new philosophy of promoting public health research in developing countries, a philosophy of which Canada has been one of the promoters since it was launched in 1987. Mexico, too, has been a strong supporter of this approach: take for example the well known Mexican epidemiologist, Dr. Jaime Sepulveda Amor, now the Deputy Minister of Health, who has been chairman since 1993 of the Council on Health Research for Development. This international body, better known under the acronym COHRED, arose out of the conclusions of a study, whose voluminous report led to the creation of national committees charged with determining subjects for essential national health research. Defining the broad lines of ENHR is not an easy task, however. Scientists do not like to favour one field of research over another, partly for fear of seeing their sources of funding dry up, if their own research should be pushed into the background, but mainly because it is extremely difficult for capable, devoted and committed researchers to give priority to one problem over another.

"Two statistics provide a good illustration of the vicious circle we have to break," says Dr. Sepulveda. "90% of health problems arise in countries of the South, the so-called developing countries. Yet 95% of the human, technical and financial resources are in the countries of the North, in Europe or the United States. The secret is to break down the barriers of ignorance at all levels, including the mistrust and resistance that exist between researchers and decision makers".

"This calls for a change in mentality," adds Dr. Sepulveda. "We have to break through this lack of communication. COHRED is helping to do this. Providers of funding want to have a clear picture of the problems; but scientists hate to establish priorities. You can see how important it is to have information."

**COMISA: ACTIVATING ENHR**

In the northern part of Mexico City is the Mexican Committee for Basic Health Research (COMISA). COMISA is expected to produce its final report on research priorities in mid-1994, a report that will be of use not only to developing countries. As the chairman, Dr. Adolfo Martinez Palomo points out: "In the health field as elsewhere, we are seeing a phenomenon of globalization. Diseases do not respect frontiers. Tourists from the North sometimes bring tropical diseases back to their countries. We have even seen how cholera, a disease that used to be thought of as typically Asian, can now cross the oceans and take root in Latin America, causing a veritable epidemic in Mexico (now under control). There is nothing to guarantee that it will not reach the United States one of these days."
The principal health problems in the major centres have already been identified, such as chronic degenerative diseases, accidents, cancers -- in particular cancer of the uterus, which is one of the main causes of mortality among women of modest means, due to the lack of regular doctor's visits and thus of any general screening. Other committees are studying the disciplines that should be promoted: molecular research, clinical research, epidemiology, health services and even the administrative and financial frameworks that need to be established or modernized. Some groups prefer to concentrate on biomedical aspects of research. For others, the main focus is on the patient.

"What we are looking to achieve above all", says the chairman of COMISA, "is an integrated analysis of all aspects of medicine, from cellular research to population studies. This is a very ambitious undertaking, but I think that we will gain something from such a global analysis. We will at least find out what are the main challenges facing us in the years ahead. That is what COMISA is all about!"

For more information, contact:

Jaime Sepulveda Amor
General Director of Epidemiology
Aniceto Ortega 1321 Colonia del Valle
Mexico D.F., Mexico
Tel: 5 524 7972 Fax: 5 534 7322

Unless otherwise stated, all articles and photos may be freely reproduced providing suitable credit is given.

ISSN 0315-9981. This magazine is listed in the Canadian Magazine Index.

- Subscription information
- Return to the IDRC Reports homepage
- Return to the IDRC homepage

Copyright © International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada
Please send your comments to editor of Reports.