The International Union against the Venereal Diseases and Treponematoses

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Foundation

The International Union against the Venereal Diseases was founded in January 1923 as a result of the increased incidence of the venereal diseases following the First World War. The initiative was taken by the League of Red Cross Societies, the Belgian Association against Venereal Diseases, various social hygiene associations, but particularly by Professor Bayet of Belgium, who organised the initial negotiations in Brussels. The inauguration and first General Assembly was held in Paris, where the headquarters of the Union was established and delegates from 19 nations took part. The objectives of the Union were to co-ordinate the activities of voluntary organisations throughout the world concerned with social measures for the control of venereal diseases.

The early days

From its inauguration in 1923 until the onset of the Second World War in 1939, meetings were held regularly on alternate years in major cities such as Brussels, The Hague, London, Paris, Madrid, Budapest, Cologne, Algiers, and Cairo. During the early period of its existence the Union became widely known as a forum for discussion of methods of control. These included the adoption of suitable laws, the establishment of appropriate clinical services, education of the medical and paramedical professions, and public health education in the subject.

It is interesting to note that contact-tracing, which is now recognised as essential in the control of the diseases, was unknown 50 years ago, and the records of the Union indicate that this measure was vehemently criticised at the time.

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Sex education also caused great problems and was difficult to establish because of enormous prejudice against the subject. However, the spread of venereal diseases among seamen was frequently discussed and the contribution of the Union to the application of the International Agreement of Brussels (1924) in respect of facilities for free treatment for all merchant seamen infected with a venereal disease was considerable.

At that time there was no general agreement about the problem of prostitution. Early in its existence the Union took a strong position against coercion and recommended the repeal of laws and regulations of that type. In their place it recommended measures based on general epidemiological principles applied to the whole population.

The postwar period

The activities of the Union started again in 1947 after the Second World War. The first post-war reunion was held in Paris in 1947, at which the governments and national societies of 32 countries took part. Since then the executive committee has met regularly every year in a major centre to plan the policy of the Union and to arrange the details of the forthcoming General Assembly. General assemblies have been held at two-yearly or three-yearly intervals in Copenhagen, Rome, Paris, Rotterdam, Naples, London, Stockholm, Washington, Lisbon, Munich, Budapest, Venice, Malta, and Leeds.

The Union was founded to co-ordinate activities on the social aspects of the control of venereal diseases and its objectives have been to stimulate the interest and assist the activities not only of those physicians practising the subject but also of epidemiologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, public health nurses, social workers, community physicians, and others concerned with human behaviour and its effect on the spread of venereal diseases. However, as a result of the great advances that have been made in medical knowledge and the appreciation that many diseases, other than the classical venereal diseases,

are spread by the sexual route, the recent programmes of the General Assembly have been more scientifically and clinically orientated than in the past and the Union has become the major world forum for the dissemination of scientific, clinical, and therapeutic knowledge about the sexually transmitted diseases. At the General Assembly in Leeds in 1978 there were 210 delegates from 25 countries.

Co-operation and expansion

In 1948 the World Health Organisation invited the Union to become one of its official advisory bodies, and during the past 30 years there has been a close and harmonious relationship between the two organisations. The effectiveness of the collaboration between the Union and the World Health Organisation has been greatly strengthened by the new criteria established by WHO in respect of non-governmental organisations.

The expansion of health programmes in developing countries in Africa and Asia and the recognition of the importance of some non-venereal treponemal diseases, such as yaws and endemic syphilis, led to increasing consultations between WHO and the Union. Many yaws eradication programmes were planned and it was decided to modify the name of the Union to include this aspect of the work. At the General Assembly in Rotterdam in 1953 the new name of the Union was adopted and it became the International Union against the Venereal Diseases and Treponematoses.

Later it was increasingly apparent that the activities of the Union should be decentralised and that regional branches should be established, as far as possible along the lines of the regions already established by WHO. There are now five regional branch offices, one in Europe, North America, Latin America, South-east Asia and the Western Pacific, and, very recently, in Africa. Regional offices have the task of stimulating local action and adapting general policy to local needs. They should also encourage new members to join the Union, initiate the organisation of local meetings in the region, and foster the close collaboration of all those working in the subject within the region.

The Union has always tried to take a global view of the subjects on its agenda and the list of presidents indicates the international nature of its activities: Professor Bayet (Belgium), Professor Ehlers (Denmark), Professor Dubois (Switzerland), Dr

Snow (United States), Professor Hermans (Holland), Dr Cavaillon (France), Dr Webster (United States), Dr King (Great Britain), Professor Canaperia (Italy), Dr Perdrup (Denmark), and Dr Catterall (Great Britain).

In the past, membership of the Union had consisted solely of organisations interested in the problems or actually working in the field. In 1962, however, it was decided to enlarge the categories of membership and to amend the statutes of the Union to introduce a new type of membership. This change enables all individuals who are interested in the work of the Union and wish to support its activities to become full members in their own right and an increasing number of individual members have joined in recent years.

The fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Union was celebrated in Brussels in May 1973 at a joint meeting of the Union, the Belgian League against Venereal Diseases, and the Medical Society for the Study of Venereal Diseases.

The future

During the last half-century the activities of the Union have gradually expanded, despite some temporary fluctuations. The Union has become a truly international organisation and it has been able to influence events in many parts of the world and to provide help and expert guidance when needed. The General Assembly of the Union,* which is held every second year, has become the major international conference for those interested in the control of the venereal diseases and treponematoses. The continuing high prevalence of infections throughout the world, and the expansion of the subject to include the many other sexually transmitted diseases, has increased the need for exchange of information and for discussion between all those working in the field, including doctors, nurses, sociologists, and medical administrators.

Membership† of the Union provides a unique opportunity to meet, discuss, and collaborate with experts from all parts of the world and to keep up to date with modern trends and developments.

*A notice about the next General Assembly of the Union appears at the end of this issue (p 57)

†Inquiries about membership of the Union should be addressed to the Secretary General: Professor Anton Luger, Krankenhaus der Stadt Wein-Lainz, 13 Wolkenbergenstrasse, A-1130 Vienna, Austria (telephone no 82 26 11); or to the Secretary at the regional office.