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NATIONAL COMMITTEES ON VITAL AND HEALTH STATISTICS

A Critical Review of National Committees on Vital  
and Health Statistics with Special Regard to  
conditions in the Eastern Mediterranean

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The idea of establishing National Committees on Vital and Health Statistics, suggested by the First World Health Assembly and recommended at the Sixth Decennial Revision Conference, was to create in member countries technical bodies concerned with vital and health statistical problems which would enable international organizations such as WHO to work with individual nations in the field of vital and health statistics and bring about better international co-ordination in this field and improvement in the uniformity of health statistics in the world. The value of such a body developing vital and health statistics in a country itself as well as internationally was repeatedly stressed by the Expert Committee on Vital and Health Statistics and recognized by several countries.

To date, 43 countries have created a National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics, or a similar body, and several others are on the point of establishing one - many on the initiative of WHO project officers assisting countries in defining ways of improving their vital and health statistics.

The organization and methods of working of the existing committees differ substantially according to the organization of the government and health statistical services. Also, the main purpose and activities of the committee depend on the organization and stage of development of vital and health statistics in a country. In countries where vital and health statistics activities are not contained in one central body, such a committee plays an important part as a co-ordinative body. Among different organizations, members are selected to represent an organization, institute or authority, concerned with vital and health statistics rather than an area of competence. In such a way a broad exchange of views between various organizations with different interests in the subject can be ensured, the whole range of statistical needs and possibilities considered, the statistical work co-ordinated and costly overlapping prevented. The existence of such a co-ordinative body in the country also enables WHO to work with that particular country.

While the Committee is considered primarily as an advisory body giving guidance on difficult statistical problems in this field the representation according to area of competence is decisive on the selection of the members

of the committee. Several countries with a centralized system of vital and health statistics, where one central governmental body has been concerned with vital and health statistics, as well as the countries without such a system, have experienced the benefit of having such an expert committee. The problems discussed by national committees varied a lot and they reflected the stages of development achieved in different fields of statistics and those fields which were of interest for the present needs of corresponding national health services. As far as developing countries were concerned, where the existing vital and health statistics system was not satisfactory because of lack of information available, the methodology used or the fact that the vital and health statistical services had barely commenced, the committee paid attention first of all to the question of what kind of vital and health statistics were needed in the country for different purposes of health, and other services, and where the priority should be. The review of the existing situation on vital and health statistics in the country was considered by the committee as the basis for further discussion. Recommendations were then made regarding the work of the committee.

The main activities of the national committees in the period between their establishment and the end of 1962 consisted in general of: - a) review of existing system in various fields of vital and health statistics and recommendations for improvement b) assessment of needs for the information for various fields of health service activities c) evaluation of statistical system existing in a country and data collected d) study of problems of statistical methodology e) stimulation of statistical studies and field surveys f) plan for future development of vital, population, morbidity, health service and other related statistics g) co-ordination of statistical work between different agencies involved in statistical work h) evaluation of programmes for training in vital and health statistics and advice on problems connected with the statistical training of medical and paramedical personnel i) study of ways of utilization of statistical data j) encouragement of the publication of statistical information and participation in deciding the scope of publications k) study of definitions, standards, classifications, rates, forms and instructions recommended by international organizations working out the definitions needed

in national statistics l) participation in preparations for the Revision of the ICD m) study of special problems related specifically to mortality, morbidity and other fields of vital and health statistics n) participation in international and inter-country studies o) study of new statistical methods for use in vital and health statistics p) co-operation with other countries.

Some committees have been very active and the results of their work have been of benefit not only nationally but also internationally. Regular meetings of committees and sub-committees, the interest of members in the field of statistics and health, an active secretariat closely involved with vital and health statistical services through daily contact, and suitable administrative and financial arrangements have been the conditions under which the activities of the committee have been able to develop successfully.

In order to keep each country informed about statistical activities in others, to stimulate statistical work, to achieve a higher level of uniformity in statistical methods and to achieve better international comparability, an exchange service was started by WHO Headquarters several years ago. National committees are expected to report their findings and recommendations from time to time to the WHO Expert Committee on Health Statistics and to send in annual reports on their activities for international consideration, clearance of national viewpoints, and "co-ordination with the interested statistical services of other intergovernmental organizations", to enable all information to be circulated. However, over the past few years only a few countries have kept WHO routinely informed of their work and on their meetings. Several countries have sent no information on changes in structure, organization of the committee or membership. The exchange of information on the activities of national committees was thus handicapped.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, four countries have reported the establishment of a national committee on vital and health statistics\* (Lebanon

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\*13/83, WHO/HS/Mat. Com./ 1, 13, 25, 32, 50, 67, 73, 83, 93, 100, 113, 124

in 1950; United Arab Republic in 1957; Israel in 1952, and Pakistan is on the point of organizing the first meeting of the committee this year.) Two committees were very active for the first years after establishment and several documents on their activities were prepared but no further information appeared on their work or on the organization, administration or other changes. No recent information could therefore be given on their activities and achievements and no statement could be prepared on why the committee had not succeeded in its proposed work. There may obviously be various reasons which may have handicapped the work of such a body. There may also be others which did not allow the work of the committee to develop at all. The conditions in which national committees start their work in various countries are certainly different. There are many factors which may influence the development of their work and be responsible for different levels of success, e.g., the stage of development of vital and health statistical services in the country, the method of selection of members, the interest of members in the development of the vital and health statistical services; the working methods of the committee, administrative and financial arrangements and the engagement of the committee secretariat in regular vital and health statistical services are some points which may influence the development of their work and be responsible for different levels of success.

The need for co-ordination of national efforts in the field of vital and health statistics is widely agreed upon both from the national and international point of view. It is further felt that the existence of a co-ordinative and advisory body in a country would be of great value in achieving such co-ordination. Therefore a critical analysis of the activities of all four committees since their establishment would be a great contribution to the study of methods of improving the work of the national committees not only in the countries under discussion but in all countries with national committees and in those still considering their establishment. The analysis should give a detailed review of the historical development of the committees, a description of the activities undertaken and results achieved, an explanation of working methods, presentation of the organization and structure of the committee membership, administrative and financial arrangements, the position of the committee, its competence in

undertaking different decisions on vital and health statistics in the country and its scope of responsibility. A discussion on which factors might have prevented the further development of the committees and a decision on plans for the future would also be very interesting to follow.

Further, it would be desirable to have - either during the conference discussion or sent in later to WHO at Headquarters or to the Regional Office - the opinions of those countries who have so far not established a national committee on vital and health statistics, on the value and usefulness of a joint body, whatever its name and structure, and their views on the existing possibilities and readiness to create such a body in the relevant countries.