

World Health Organization bids adieu to Hans Hogerzeil – The dynamic Director of Essential Medicines and Pharmaceutical Policies

Sir,

On May 31, 2011, Hans Hogerzeil, Director of Essential Medicines and Pharmaceutical Policies, World Health Organization (WHO), Geneva, received a touching sendoff from the staff and colleagues of WHO, an agency which he had served for 26 years. Hans received his medical degree from the University of Leiden, The Netherlands, and spent his early years as a doctor in India, working in a leprosy mission hospital, and later in a hospital in Ghana, Africa. Hans joined the WHO's Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (EMRO) in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1985 and worked with Prof. Ranjit Roy Chaudhury for a few years. Later, he joined the WHO Action Programme on Essential Drugs at the WHO headquarters in Geneva and went on to become the Director of Essential Medicines and Pharmaceutical Policies. Hans played a vital role in building on and strengthening the edifice built by stalwarts of the essential drugs movement, like Mahler, Lauridsen and Helling-Borda. Hans is well known in India for his book "A guide to good prescribing", which has been translated into many languages, and its sister publication, "A teacher's guide to good prescribing".

In view of his retirement and to mark the occasion of the third decade of the WHO's Action Programme on Essential Medicines, the *Chateau des Penthes* in Geneva was the

setting for a day long brainstorming consultation titled "The next generation of essential medicines" which was held on May 30, 2011. The grand old men and women, who started the essential medicines movement in WHO, mingled with the next generation health professionals to celebrate 30 years of the Action Programme on Essential Medicines, identify strategic directions for the future and to involve and motivate the next generation of colleagues and experts.

The consultation started with Carissa Etienne, Assistant Director of Health Systems and Services, WHO, welcoming the participants and briefly describing how the Action Programme on Essential Medicines started. Jonathan Quick moderated the session "How it all began: 1977–1989" with reminiscences by M. Helling-Borda on the first essential medicines list, P. Brudon on the Nairobi Conference in 1985 and comments by E. Lauridsen and former Director-General of WHO, H. Mahler, during a panel discussion "What have we learnt?". The challenges faced by these early stalwarts and how they were overcome set the mood for the rest of the day. The next session was moderated by Kees de Joncheere which was on "The 1990's: Large country programmes on essential medicines". The discussion focused on the essential medicines programs in Sudan, Kenya, South Africa and Vietnam and described the progress that had been made in these countries. The officers

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who had started these programs shared the platform with the present national professional officers and shared the progress made, setbacks in implementation and the lessons learnt. After the coffee break, the session was on “The 2000’s: New dimensions of the essential medicines concept”. Dr. Suzanne Hill, Medicines Access and Rational Use, WHO, spoke on the future of the Model List of Essential Medicines and described the procedural steps that have slowly evolved in the process of preparation of the WHO model essential medicines list and the children’s list. Gitanjali Batmanabane spoke next on the “Essential Medicines for Children in India” and described the “Better Medicines for Children” project in India. She explained the pricing and availability surveys that had been conducted in Chhattisgarh and Orissa and the essential medicines for children which have been included in the state essential medicines list.

After lunch, there was an interesting session on “The 2010’s: Essential medicines within health reform”. The essential medicines concept and health reform in China was aptly described by Ye Lu. Richard Laing, Team Leader – Medicine Information and Evidence for Policy, WHO, spoke on the “need for generic policies as part of health reform”. The icing on the cake was the last talk of the day “The future of essential medicines” by Hans Hogerzeil, who described his journey of two and a half decades with photographs, anecdotes and

illustrations. His speech was the testimony of a remarkable voyage of a man with a mission and served to infuse all those who gathered there with enthusiasm and optimism for the future of essential medicines. The standing ovation he received was just one small gesture of appreciation he received that day. The reception at the conclusion of the consultation was a fitting end to a wonderful day of reminiscences, shared experiences and hope.

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