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EDITORIAL

This year has seen another International Conference on Mental Retardation. It is not quite clear whether it is the third or fourth International Conference but it was the first *united* International Conference. This year's Copenhagen meeting healed the schism of the two opposing attitudes to the problem of mental retardation and from now onwards future conferences will represent the multi-disciplinary approach rather than that of a "Permanent International Medical Conference on Mental Retardation" as put by the Portland Conference.

The Copenhagen Conference of 1964, a direct successor to the London Conference of 1960, was highly successful from every point of view. The very fact that workers belonging to one discipline could hear and meet other workers from allied disciplines must have led to beneficial cross-fertilization and to an appreciation of their own local problems in the perspective of the wider endeavour of many specialist interests. It should have encouraged many who feel they are fighting a lonely up-hill battle and should have stimulated them to see their problems in a new light.

The atmosphere of the Copenhagen Congress was noticeably different from that of its immediate predecessor, the Vienna Congress of 1961. This refers not only to the one-sided Vienna Conference programme itself, which insisted on looking at the problems only from a narrow viewpoint, but also to the superior organization of the conference by the Danes. This is not the place to review the superb administration of the Congress in detail and it must suffice to give one important example which is representative of the hard work and excellent management which went into this Congress.

It is the traditional practice of a Congress to publish proceedings which contain many original papers which are otherwise not obtainable. There is often an appreciable delay in publication which makes some of the papers appear obsolete by the time they actually become available. The Proceedings of the Portland Congress of 1959 were published in 1960, those of the London Conference of 1960 in 1962, and those of the Vienna Congress of 1961 in 1963. When the Copenhagen Congress started in 1964 95% of the papers were ready for the printers, and at the time of writing this we have been assured that the Proceedings will be distributed in the very near future, e.g. four months after the Congress. Having seen the Danish organization at work we are sure we can fully rely on this promise.

Mental retardation has never been very conspicuous for efficiency and organization. One might wonder whether this is a direct consequence of having to work in the so-called unpromising field of mental handicap where no-one expects much success or progress. Organizing the unresponsive and being efficient with

the mentally retarded has not been a characteristic feature of work in mental handicap, and this may well reflect on our ability to tackle the larger organizational framework needed to back the individual worker.

The Copenhagen Congress has seen the birth of an International Association on Mental Retardation. This might be an important development provided it can be made to grow into an international exchange of practical knowledge and experience and is capable of assisting with advice and support rather than remaining simply an organizing body for International Conferences.

One may well question the status of an International body when most countries have not managed yet to organize themselves on a national basis. In this country the field is divided up among many professional organizations each with *some* interest in mental retardation but not exclusively concerned with the work. The N.A.M.H., R.M.P.A., Association for Special Education, Guild of Teachers of Backward Children, Mental Welfare Officers, to name only a few, make efforts towards giving their members and interested visitors as much information as is available to them, but there are many cross-sectional barriers which interfere with the exchange of experience and knowledge.

Why has it not been possible to create a National Organization of the same character as an International Conference which is open to all workers in the field and which provides a National platform for expressing opinions which could be heard by all sections of this multi-disciplinary subject? Visitors to this country interested in the various aspects of subnormality work are still liable to see only one side of it depending which organisation, be it British Council, Ministry of Health etc., happens to sponsor them.

Over the years a good deal of practical experience has been gathered. There are many different approaches and individualistic experiments attempting to adjust new ideas to the realities of local conditions. Many aspects of our work are in no way "better handled" here than in other countries but the variety of approaches and attempts to socialize and rehabilitate the subnormal for living and working in the community are interesting and worthy of careful study. There is some expertise available in this and other countries which could be of great use to those countries only now beginning to think of their subnormality problems.

The new International Organization will also attempt to give help and advice to countries which do not possess highly developed facilities. This is probably one of its most important functions and would give those workers who wish to draw upon the experiences of other countries and travel there at great cost a better chance to make sure to see and talk with those experts who are of importance to their own work.

It is difficult to see how this particular task can be adequately tackled by an International Organization which would in each particular case have to try to obtain information from many different National bodies rather than from one National organization.

The formation of a National Body requires much organizational work and good will from all sides. It seems rather curious that it should be easier and apparently more promising to evolve an International Organization before National Bodies have become available, but it is certain that an International Body which exists in the end only by consulting the memory and experience of individual experts has little chance to do its work efficiently. A National Organization to act as an exchange for the various bodies of workers with specific interests is a *sine qua non* for the success of an International Organization. It is about time that this task was taken in hand in this country.