

ACTION ON RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE FIFTH COMMONWEALTH MEDICAL CONFERENCE

Action by the Secretariat

Paper prepared by the Commonwealth Secretariat

The theme of the Fifth Commonwealth Medical Conference, in New Zealand in November 1977, was Community Health, and the discussions were primarily concerned with the requirements for improving the health planning and executive capacities of Commonwealth member countries.

2. The Conference reviewed action taken following the Fourth Commonwealth Medical Conference and considered the studies commissioned by the Commonwealth Secretariat on the basis of the recommendations of that conference. These studies were on:

Brain drain

Maintenance and repair of medical equipment

Drug procurement and quality control

Abortion law and practice in Commonwealth countries

3. The main agenda items of the conference focused attention on topics of special importance for raising the level of community health in member countries. These were:

Community participation

Food and nutrition

The roles of health ministries and medical schools

Changing health care delivery system

Enhancing Commonwealth collaboration in the health sector

4. A paper summarising the conference recommendations was sent to governments with Secretariat Circular Letter No. 9/78 of 13 February 1978. That paper identified those recommendations that were directed:

(a) to member governments for action at the national, regional or inter-regional level, and

(b) to the Secretariat.

5. A number of the recommendations involved overlapping or related activities, and some were for simultaneous action by the Secretariat and member countries. Although discussed separately, appropriate action on the latter requires joint decisions.

6. The Secretariat has sought from governments information on action taken at the national level; information received has been collated and is contained in a separate paper. A further paper has been prepared on action at regional level. The present paper is concerned with the

recommendations directed mainly to the Secretariat.

BRAIN DRAIN

7. The recommendations directed to the Secretariat on the subject of brain drain were:

- (a) that it should provide, on request, short-term consultants to assist national and regional projects and studies;
- (b) that it should ensure inter-regional exchange of information on the work of regional groups established to consider health manpower planning problems and the appropriate distribution of resources.

Consultancy Service

8. The Secretariat responded, by providing the services of a consultant, to requests from governments for assistance with health planning and manpower development. The consultant's assignments have involved consideration of brain drain as well as of professional standards, staff deployment and the training of health personnel, on both a national and a regional basis. (See also paragraph 30 below).

Inter-regional exchange of information

9. Exchange of information on the work of regional groups is being facilitated by the Secretariat as appropriate knowledge about them is received.

MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR OF MEDICAL EQUIPMENT

10. The recommendations for the Commonwealth Secretariat concerning the maintenance and repair of medical equipment were:

- (a) that it should promote and mobilise resources for regional projects;
- (b) that it should seek information on equipment and make it available to member countries.

Resources for regional projects

11. The development of regional training based in Swaziland for countries of the East, Central and Southern Africa region has been supported by the Secretariat. An instructor for the course at the Swaziland College of Technology and funds to cover training fellowships awarded by the Regional Health Secretariat have been provided. The first two-year course was completed in December 1979 and the second course is now in progress. The Regional Health Secretariat and the College are jointly responsible for the organisation of this training. The Commonwealth Secretariat has offered training fellowships to increase the intake of the WHO inter-country project in Sierra Leone for training in medical engineering.

Exchange of information on equipment

12. The wide range of equipment at present used in Commonwealth countries makes difficult any Secretariat initiative in this respect. The Secretariat could probably help best by providing member countries or regions with information about specific equipment needs as these are identified.

PHARMACEUTICALS

13. It was recommended that the Secretariat should provide support for the national, regional and inter-regional activities proposed by the conference, and should provide information on work being undertaken in the pharmaceutical field.

14. The implementation of these recommendations by the Secretariat is dependent on national and regional decisions for action and collaboration. Essential first steps for achieving this were seen to be:

- (a) the formation of effective regional panels of experts;
- (b) the provision of opportunities for meetings of such groups of experts regionally and, when appropriate, at the inter-regional level, so that the necessary collaborative efforts can be worked out and followed up.

15. The Commonwealth Secretariat, like WHO and a number of other international agencies, attaches the highest importance to national and regional policies in the pharmaceutical field. When resources permit, it is able to assist countries and regions with consultancies, workshops, seminars, teaching programmes, and activities of the regional panels of experts referred to above.

16. The Secretariat has given particular attention to national and regional activities concerning pharmaceuticals in the Caribbean; East, Central and Southern Africa; West Africa; and the Pacific. In 1978, it recruited and financed one member of a three-man expert committee (the other two members were financed by UNICEF) which visited ten Commonwealth countries in East, Central and Southern Africa and made recommendations to the regional Conference of Health Ministers for collaboration in this field, including regional contracting.

17. The Secretariat continues to collate and distribute inter-regionally reports and studies already under way in this field in member countries, and also in international agencies such as WHO, UNICEF, UNIDO, UNCTAD and PAHO.

ABORTION LAW AND PRACTICE AND OTHER MEDICAL-LEGAL ISSUES

18. It was recommended that the Secretariat should ensure that the information contained in the report on abortion law and practice, submitted to the conference, should be kept up to date. The appropriate action to achieve this has been put in hand.

19. The conference saw merit in the proposal to convene workshops or seminars on the wider issues of fertility regulation, including both medical and legal aspects, if there were sufficient interest and support from governments. Bearing in mind also the emphasis placed by the conference on appropriate deployment of health manpower and the attention drawn to other medical-legal issues, including the regulation of advertising inimical to health, the Secretariat asked whether governments would support the holding of, and participate in, workshops to examine such issues.

20. The response being favourable, the Secretariat organised two inter-disciplinary workshops in 1979 - the first in Barbados, the second in Malawi - in which representatives of both health and law ministries and resource persons drawn from universities and other non-governmental organisations took part. Among the papers considered by the workshops was a study on legislation governing the use of paramedics for primary health care, commissioned by the Secretariat. The object of holding these workshops was to assist governments to ensure that their legislation is appropriate for the changes currently taking place in the organisation of health care delivery. The reports of both workshops and the study on the use of paramedics have been distributed to governments.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

21. The recommendations under this heading are that:

- (a) individual topics covered in the report should be considered as a basis for more intensive discussion, perhaps at regional level;
- (b) consideration should be given to facilitating the training of health education specialists' and the provision of equipment and materials;
- (c) commercial advertising which advocates ways of life inimical to health needs further study, and is a possible topic for future Commonwealth discussion;
- (d) sympathetic consideration should be given to requests from member governments for assistance in establishing or strengthening health service planning units;
- (e) emphasis should be placed on the training of trainers of health personnel, with continuing support through the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC);
- (f) visits by health personnel to study particular approaches to community participation should be facilitated through the CFTC;
- (g) priority should be given (by multilateral and bilateral aid agencies) to requests from governments for assistance in the health field.

22. Secretariat action on this group of recommendations largely depends on decisions by member governments or regional groups. The Secretariat will continue actively to assist governments to identify and meet their needs in the areas covered by these recommendations.

23. Advertising inimical to health is one of the subjects discussed by the medical-legal workshops mentioned in paragraphs 19 - 20 above. Assistance relating to health services planning units is dealt with in paragraphs 29 - 30 below.

24. In the field of health education, the Secretariat took the initiative of commissioning a study to prepare a health education module for insertion in the courses at the three Commonwealth Regional Youth Development Centres - based in Guyana, India and Zambia - and also for courses started in Fiji for the Pacific, and for subsequent use by trainees on their return to their home countries. The consultant visited three of the regions, and prepared a report incorporating a suitable curriculum, and it is hoped that this project will be seminal in its effect. The report has been distributed to governments. The possibility of improving health education in schools is also under consideration.

FOOD AND NUTRITION

25. Recommendations for the Secretariat were that:

- (a) the priorities of the Secretariat should be re-examined with a view to placing greater emphasis on nutrition - if necessary, governments should provide additional resources to enable the Secretariat to assist in the promotion of nutrition programmes;
- (b) the Secretariat should act as a channel for the exchange of information on such aspects as trained personnel available for consultation; low-cost technology for food storage and preservation; analytical work on the nutritive intervention programmes at community level; procedures and legislation on food standards and adulteration; and the regulation of commercial advertising of foods;
- (c) the Secretariat should prepare an inventory of facilities for training in nutrition; assist country-based or regional training courses by providing fellowships, visual aids and other teaching equipment; assist in the training of manpower for, and in the setting-up of, national and regional food analysis and food standards laboratories.

26. There have been discussions with Commonwealth governments at the national and regional level with a view to determining the practical measures required for implementing the conference recommendations.

27. In relation to (b), the Secretariat's Food Production and Rural Development Division sponsored a regional workshop in West Africa in

1977 on post-harvest losses, and in September/October 1978 it organised a regional grain conservation seminar for East, Central and Southern Africa, in Lusaka. The object of these meetings was to promote the exchange of information, the provision of training opportunities and the adoption of appropriate and cost-effective systems to reduce post-harvest losses. Two illustrated booklets on low-cost food storage facilities have been prepared and distributed. Legislation on food standards and the regulation of commercial advertising of foods were discussed at the two medical-legal workshops mentioned in paragraphs 19 - 20 above.

28. In relation to (c), a consultant was commissioned to prepare a directory of health training resources in the Commonwealth, including facilities for training in nutrition, for the information and assistance of member countries. This has been published under the title Health training: a directory of Commonwealth resources and distributed to governments. The cooperation of governments and training institutions in supplying information incorporated in the directory is greatly appreciated.

ROLE OF HEALTH MINISTRIES AND MEDICAL SCHOOLS

29. The recommendation was that the Secretariat should provide a consultancy service to assist individual countries, at their request, in setting up, co-ordinating and monitoring the progress of national health manpower production and health administration programmes, especially at the intermediate management level. In addition, the conference considered that this service could ensure continuing exchanges of knowledge and views on relevant health issues among member states.

30. The Secretariat has been able to assist several countries, on the lines set out in the recommendation, by providing the services of the consultant already mentioned in paragraph 8 above. He has visited several Caribbean countries at the request of the Caribbean Community Secretariat, who arranged his programme in consultation with their governments, and the Health Ministries of St. Lucia and St. Kitts, in particular, have been given detailed advice in connection with national health plans and health manpower development. He has assisted the Seychelles Ministry of Health in the preparation of its new national health plan, has paid brief visits to Botswana and Lesotho (and also, Swaziland, on behalf of another agency), and has recently advised the Government of Malaysia on nursing staff levels and training requirements. He also took part in a regional workshop in Arusha on health management for senior staff from East, Central and Southern African countries.

CHANGING HEALTH CARE DELIVERY SYSTEMS

31. It was recommended that the Secretariat should obtain and summarise information about existing patterns of primary health care in Commonwealth countries, analyse and evaluate significant achievements and shortcomings, and disseminate the information collected to all Commonwealth governments. The information required by this recommendation has been kindly supplied by governments and incorporated in Health training: a directory of Commonwealth resources.

ENHANCING COMMONWEALTH COLLABORATION IN THE HEALTH SECTOR

32. The conference confirmed and emphasised:

- (a) the broad policy-formulating and goal-setting role of the triennial conferences;
- (b) the importance of sustained follow-up of conference recommendations during the intervals between conferences;
- (c) the value of collaboration among member countries in planning and implementing health policies and programmes.

33. As requested by the conference, the Secretariat prepared a paper outlining proposals relating to the triennial Meetings of Commonwealth Health Ministers, the Pre-WHA Meetings, annual regional meetings of Health Ministers and meetings with the chief officers of Commonwealth regional health agencies. These proposals were found acceptable by the 1978 Pre-WHA Meeting and have been implemented.