

Letter to World Citizens

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Vol, X/6, Dec/Jan 97

Frustration at a Major Conference

What does health have to do with humans rights? I attended the 2nd International Conference on Health and Human Rights at Harvard University, Oct. 3-5, to learn how the academic and health worlds joined the two. It was organized by the Francois-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard whose founder, Albina du Boisrouvray of Geneva, is an old friend and longtime holder of a WSA World Passport.

The list of conference speakers and chairs read like the Who's Who of the world's medical and academic professions. Organizations affiliated with the conference included Amnesty International, Center for Women's Global Leadership, Human Rights Watch, International Commission for Jurists, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, International Human Rights Law Group, Medecin du Monde, Oxfam America, Physicians for Human Rights, UNICEF, WHO and the World Federation of Public Health Associations.

Dr. Jonathan Mann of the Harvard School of Public Health, the conference chairperson, called it a commitment to "societal transformation." In a letter to the participants, he recalled that at the first conference, "we spoke about building a bridge between the fields of health and human rights." At this conference, he said, "we are eager to explore how ideas about the inextricable connection between health and human rights have been, and can become, translated into action in communities, countries and at the international level."

The opening plenary session was entitled, "Health and Human Rights: The Global Perspective." The speakers were Neil Rudenstine, president of Harvard U.; Simone Veil, former minister of state, minister for Social, Health and Urban Affairs, France; Peter Piot, executive director, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV-AIDS; Sunila Abeysekera, director of INFORM, Sri Lanka; and Jonathan Mann, professor of Epidemiology and International Health, Harvard School of Public Health. It was an impressive opening roster.

At the start, I expected to hear Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) quoted by the opening speaker: "(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control; (2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection."

Not only did the Harvard president not mention Article 25, he did not even mention the UDHR as the seminal document linking health and human rights. Nor did any of the

following speakers. The omission, of course, precluded any mention of the rule of world law to implement or protect human rights as prescribed in the Preamble of the UDHR.

In the question period, I managed to broach the renegade subject but was summarily brushed off as an brash intruder in an otherwise serious debate.

And so it went. I attended round table sessions on “Medical Ethics and Human Rights”; “Preventing Genocide”; “Women’s Health and Human Rights”; “The Right to Health: Making It Real”; “New Challenges to the Humanitarian Movement”; “The Legacy of the Doctor’s Trial at Nuremberg: Health Workers and Human Rights”; and finally, “Current and Emerging Issues in Health and Human Rights.” While the speakers were well-informed, analytical and invariably deplored human rights violations by state officials worldwide, no one, whether speaking or in the audience, seemed either aware or interested in the UDHR and its connection to health.

As for the concept of world government and its relationship to human rights and health, there was not a glimmer of awareness among the conference participants, and when the issue was raised, it was considered an annoyance. As I attempted to make the linkage in every session I attended, I began to sound like the proverbial broken record.

I was able, however, to distribute our literature between sessions and even sold a few dozen copies of *Passport to Freedom*.

I felt that I made a connection with a speaker during the session, “New Challenges to the Humanitarian Movement” when Elizabeth Walker of the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children spoke of the problem women refugees face when they have to confront state officials and they have no documents. I then informed her of the issuance of human rights documents such as passports, birth certificates and world ID cards by the World Service Authority, which excited and amazed her.

During the Cambridge stay, I enjoyed the gracious hospitality of Eveline Kushi in Brookline Village, whose husband Michio, our WG health commissioner, was lecturing in Japan. And speaking of health, the macrobiotic meals, excellently prepared and served at her house, were not only delicious but eminently nourishing!