

Projets Outre-Mer — Overzeese Projecten — Overseas Projects

CENETROP : A JOINT BELGIAN-BOLIVIAN MEDICAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT IN SANTA CRUZ, BOLIVIA

CENETROP (National Center of Tropical Diseases) started its activities in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, the capital city of the Bolivian tropical lowlands on the 1st of August, 1974. The objectives of this center are :

- to promote optimal diagnostic and therapeutic schemes in connection with tropical diseases and to act as clinical referral center;
- to plan and execute epidemiological studies, surveillance and control programs;
- to train laboratory personnel and perform in-job training of medical doctors and students in tropical medicine and public health;
- to organize and perform biomedical research in tropical diseases.

The execution of the project is under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Health on the Bolivian side and the « Prince Leopold » Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp on the Belgian side.

From the start, care has been taken to preserve the authentic Bolivian character of this institute. For this reason the Belgian presence is restricted to one person, while all final decisions in relation with programming and execution are taken by the Bolivian Director in Santa Cruz.

The financial contribution of Belgium for the period 1974-1979 totals some 40 million Belgian francs and covers the following aspects : construction of buildings, fellowships for Bolivians to specialize in Belgium, visits of Belgian experts to Bolivia, running expenses of scientific research and salary supplementation to allow exclusive dedication of the highest staff to institute programs and to extend the normal 6 hour workday to 8 hours.

The cost of running the laboratories and the wages of the Bolivian personnel (35 members in 1979) is covered by the Bolivian government.

Considerable attention was devoted at the first selection of the principal staff members. Of the 150 candidates, only 15 were chosen to pursue the 3 month introductory course, and of these, 8 were finally selected. Their specialization in branches of tropical medicine was organized at the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp.

As of the present time, the following have been realized :

1. The main building (1,100 m²) has been conceptualized and constructed and was formally inaugurated in February 1978.

2. Three major tropical diseases have been selected as the first priorities : Chagas' disease, South American leishmaniasis and leprosy.

CHAGAS' DISEASE is highly prevalent in the valleys but less so in the lowlands. A multisectorial study team was organized within CENETROP, grouping own personnel and certain highly competent specialists from the city of Santa Cruz. The task of this team is to study the problem of this disease in every aspect, to elaborate control programs and to evaluate their effectiveness. This team has met weekly since its formation two years ago; its achievements have exceeded all expectations.

The first survey showed that the endemicity was more important than presumed; 90 per cent of the adults were found to be infected, of whom 10 per cent developed clinical signs and 2 per cent important myocardial lesions.

SOUTH AMERICAN LEISHMANIASIS occurs as cutaneous ulcers in this part of Bolivia. Later manifestations consist of destructive lesions on the oral mucosa, the pharynx and the nose. The hideous lesions are often mistaken for leprosy by the local population. A survey of the endemic area showed the prevalence to be as high as 2 per cent. Different schemes of treatment with Glucantime were studied. It was confirmed that this drug was efficient and of relatively low toxicity. Studies of possible vectors and reservoirs were planned and initiated.

LEPROSY in Bolivia is known to exist in three important foci, one of which is located in Santa Cruz, with a prevalence rate of 1.2 per cent. Epidemiological and sociological investigations were started with the support of the Belgian philanthropical organism « Damiaanaktie — Les Amis du Père Damien ».

3. In a country like Bolivia, with its need for trained medical personnel, it is mandatory that an institute like CENETROP should be a focus for the diffusion of knowledge and knowhow. Conscious of this responsibility, the institute agreed to organize the practical training of laboratory auxiliaries for the department of Santa Cruz, recently graduated medical doctors, and students in medicine and clinical chemistry.

A special Teaching Unit was organized, responsible for the elaboration and organization of teaching programs. Two basic health centers were selected to participate in this teaching activity in order to keep it as practical as possible. Integrated medicine is being organized in these centers under the technical supervision of CENETROP. One of these centers, Santa Rosita, is a tropical urban project located in a suburb of Santa Cruz; the other one, Vallegrande, is located in a rural, subtropical valley of the Andes mountains.

Apart from their value in teaching and in providing suitable areas for epidemiological and prospective studies, these projects have an important impact on the improvement of the health of the population involved (over 38,000 inhabitants).

At the present time, over 120 laboratory technicians have been trained; some eighty senior medical students went through an internship period of ten weeks; over ninety medical doctors attended a two-week postgraduate training session. Trainees in clinical chemistry were admitted recently to the laboratories of the institute.

4. CENETROP operates its own outpatient clinic, dealing with diagnosis and treatment of patients with a tropical disease problem; actually 75 per cent of these patients are referred to CENETROP by local physicians. Affiliation with a diagnostic hospital ward (20 beds) is under consideration.

5. Since sufficiently trained personnel are now available within CENETROP, a start has been made with biomedical research activities. This is highly needed. Modalities for close cooperation with the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp and other Belgian academic institutions are being investigated.

The main emphasis of the planned research activity is its applicability to local situations, since every effort has to be made to improve the health of the local population, as a first priority. Planning and implementation of the research programs is being undertaken in cooperation with the Tropical Medicine Institute in Antwerp, which regularly sends experts in different fields to Bolivia.

The first five-year programs for CENETROP run until the end of July, 1979. Accomplishments were considered highly valuable and further programming judicious. The further planning includes the extension of local control programs to other areas of the country. A symbiosis between scientific curiosity and practical applicability must be developed further in the research activities. Moreover, a start should be made with the actual take over of the scientific, operational, technical and administrative activities by the trained Bolivian personnel, to ensure the continued viability of the program after the suspension of the Belgian technical assistance.

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