A New International Congress for Infectious Diseases?

An Interview with Professor E. H. Kass

The first International Congress for Infectious Diseases took place in Vienna, August 24–27, 1983, during the week preceding the International Congress of Chemotherapy. Professor E. H. Kass, Boston, is the President of this new international assembly for scientific exchange on Infectious Diseases (see also *INFECTION* 10 [1982] 377). Dr. Elisabeth Gabler-Sandberger, the Co-Editor of *INFECTION*, spoke to Professor Kass.

Question: Professor Kass, what was the stimulus to initiate the first International Congress for Infectious Diseases?

Professor Kass: The first stimulus actually occurred in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, when colleagues from nine countries asked George Jackson and myself about the foundation of the Infectious Diseases Society of America and about the possibility of an international organization that would follow somewhat similar principles. Dr. Jackson could not be at the meeting in Florence two years ago when there was an informal meeting of people who might be interested in such an organization.

Question: So you and others felt that there was a need for a new form of communication on infectious diseases?

Professor Kass: My feeling has been severalfold. The first is that in developed countries infectious diseases as a discipline is undergoing a rapid evolution, an evolution away from the traditional fever hospital and towards the role of infectious diseases specialists in day to day activity in the General Hospital.

Secondly, with the budget cuts and so on, the person interested in infectious disease must understand all of the antimicrobial drugs and, including the so-called tropical diseases, the mycoses and so on. There is a need to have an even broader education than ever before.

Thirdly, we have the appalling problem of the huge impact of infectious diseases on the developing world.

Fourthly, there is a tendency in many countries for the infectious diseases organizations to be very restrictive in their membership. Everyone agrees with the principle that we should all work together. But in many infectious diseases societies the membership is limited to physicians who are clinicians. These special restrictions often fail to serve the needs of a more dynamic society. And I believe that the evolutionary trend in modern society is towards a much wider integration of all the elements of infectious disease. So there is a strong sense, particularly among the younger people, that the need is for an international society that would put together the clinical aspects, the microbiologic, the immunologic, the protozoal, the helminthic, the governmental aspects. People with different kinds of responsibilities need to discuss the basic problems which are: how to communicate the advances in understanding and control of infectious disease and in technology and how to make these available for everyone in the world.

These were the basic ideas that led to a new type of society with the aim to keep it more academic, to try to keep its intellectual level as high as possible; and to start with the fundamental idea that membership would be individual, not by national societies, so that everyone who was interested in the discipline could become a member without restrictions for age, for sex, for race, for country of affiliation or anything except interest in this field.

Question: Could you please give us the name of the new society?

Professor Kass: The new society is called "*The International Congress for Infectious Diseases*."

There is under active discussion the question of forming a still larger society by combining the International Congress with the International Federation for Infectious and Parasitic Diseases. The International Federation for Infectious and Parasitic Diseases is a federation of national societies. So now there is a committee from each of the two

societies examining the different ways that the two could come together and form a new society that would, I think, bring new vitality to infectious disease. There are certain realities that must be faced. There are closed currency countries where funds cannot leave, where national societies have a strong role in the internal and legal structure, and provision must be made for these realities.

Question: There were more than 750 participants from 72 countries all over the world! One can assume that they came with great expectations. Do you feel that these expectations of qualified scientific communication were fulfilled at the Congress?

Professor Kass: I must say, I found it the most exciting international meeting I have ever attended. We were able to achieve representation from countries that never sent people to meetings of this sort in the past. And for good reason: because in so many instances what has been discussed in the meetings had little relevance to their problems. We set up for the first two days of the Congress a two-day workshop on strategies of control of infection in developing countries and tried to keep attendance small, so we could have good discussions. The participants and the speakers were all people who had worked in developing countries and most were from developing countries. What came out were practical ideas for health care and research at the local community levels as well as recommendations for health ministries, etc. Then in the Congress we followed our theme to describe the infectious disease problems of the developing world. Dr. Mahler, director-general of the WHO opened, and then we discussed prospects of eradication of infection. And then slowly we moved to newer technology, to the newer concepts and technical advances and how these in turn could be used to give greater efficiency and greater economy in the control of disease. And then at the forefront we heard some of the newest developments such as on etiologic agents of leukemia, of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, of toxic shock syndrome, of Legionnaires' disease and so on. We had also 250 research abstracts presented in the scientific sessions in the afternoon. They were extremely well attended and lively. I already know of several projects that are already being planned in consequence of last week's meeting.

Question: Do you already have ideas about the theme of the next congress?

Professor Kass: We have just begun to talk about it. The reason for withholding further information is that we now have three proposals where the next congress should be held, from Egypt, Brazil and Mexico. All the proposals will be submitted by November 15 and the executive committee will then try to make its decision as quickly as possible. The next congress will therefore be in a developing country. We would like to keep the costs as low as possible, naturally. We would like not to meet in the biggest, fanciest places, but rather in the places that would be intellectually the most satisfying. I imagine that the fundamental theme would not be much different from the congress of last week. I have every confidence that the next meeting will have a much larger attendance, because the enthusiasm and interest at the Congress was so exciting.

Question: Would you like to name the president for the next congress?

Professor Kass: The officers for the past congress were *ad hoc*. So they have now been elected and they are officially elected. I remain the president, Professor Visco the secretary, Professor Acar the treasurer. However, in our statutes we are trying to develop a larger continuity. Therefore, the president-elect has already been elected and that is Professor Francis Waldvogel of Geneva. He will become president at the next meeting. But in addition, wherever we choose for the meeting to be, there will be the chairman and the secretary of the organizing committee. They will be the actual people who will run the local congress and will have the most prominent role.

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