

Mexico's population has been growing rapidly. Although the rate of growth will gradually decline, millions of people continue to be added to medical care programs every year. Half of all Mexicans are under 30 years old.

Mexico is faced with a growing incidence of "first-world" diseases, such as cardiovascular ailments, cancer, mental disabilities and addictions. At the same time, it must continue to cope with the diseases of underdevelopment, including infectious diseases, parasites and malnutrition as well as maternal and neonatal deaths.

The magnitude and the complexity of these challenges has been recognized in Mexico, and there is growing awareness that new policies, administrative structures, infrastructure and delivery systems are needed. Several recent studies have examined alternative means of restructuring the Health Care System. One of them, carried out by the *Fundación Mexicana para la Salud (FUNSALUD)*, the Mexican Health Fund, has received particular attention. Among its recommendations are the following:

- decentralization of health care delivery to a designated authority in each state;
- separation of financing and delivery of services;
- re-organization of health care by function instead of by target population;
- assignment of regulatory functions solely to the *Secretaría de Salud (SS)*, Secretariat of Health; and
- competition between the public and private sectors to give the client seeking care, a choice among providers.

These proposals have been featured in speeches by President Zedillo and they are likely to become government policy under his administration.

The need for improved quality and efficiency has also been recognized by Mexican health care authorities. A first step was taken in 1990 when a task force of public and private health care agencies was created to establish certification standards for hospitals. The certification standards were released in March 1994. They rely heavily on guidelines issued by the *Organización Panamericana de la Salud*, Panamerican Health Organization.

Certification in accordance with the new standards is voluntary. A pilot program involving six private hospitals began in the fall of 1994, and they are expected to be certified within five years. Certification standards will be extended to laboratories, radiology units and other medical services and professions in the future.

