
Brock Chisholm

Dr. Chisholm's Prescription for Survival

■ George Brock Chisholm was the first Canadian to serve the United Nations in a major role—as the first director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO). As well as being a pioneer among medical administrators, he was a truly great internationalist and thinker. One biographer has noted, “He was one of the first to emphasize the danger of pollution, overpopulation and the nuclear arms race.”

Born in 1896, he enlisted as a private in the First World War, was commissioned in the field, wounded and twice decorated. After graduating in medicine and spending some years in general practice, he became a psychiatrist in Toronto. During the Second World War he was Director General of Medical Services for the Canadian Army, and in 1945 was recruited as Deputy Minister of Health in the new federal department of Health and Welfare.

Very soon he moved onto the international stage, to help prepare the International Health Conference of June 1946, including the draft constitution of the World Health Organization. After two years as executive secretary of its Interim Commission, he became the first director-general of WHO in June 1948. He retired in 1953, even though he was offered a three-year prolongation, because (he said) “I believe that a permanent organization should not have the same head for too long, particularly at the beginning of its history. There is a real difficulty in too firm identification of a world organization with one person.”

Dr. Chisholm achieved a good deal in those seven years with WHO. The agency began with six priority programs: campaigns against malaria, TB, and venereal diseases; and an emphasis on maternal and child health, nutrition, and environmental hygiene. WHO's fight against communicable diseases can be shown in two examples: it helped control an outbreak of cholera in Egypt in 1947, and it launched a campaign against yaws in Haiti.

But Dr. Chisholm was also concerned to decentralize WHO and to encourage health programs at the national level. At the same time, WHO came to be recognized as having responsibility for the co-ordination of all international health work.

In 1952 the total WHO budget came to \$8.48 million (Canada contributed \$268 854), a figure Dr. Chisholm described as “ridiculously small ... no more than the amount many a large city spends on its own municipal sanitary arrangements.” Yet he also worried, in a speech in 1951, about “the tremendous influx of vast amounts of money” raised by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and thought that that money could disrupt the health services of governments, which would be under pressure to spend funds quickly on programs calculated to produce “spectacular or easily demonstrable results.” He argued that in this context, WHO had a basic concern with the training of technical personnel who could oversee the orderly development of their national health services.

These were the concerns of 35 years ago. In this book, we have chosen to remember Dr. Chisholm by words that contain as much weight and poignant relevance now as when he spoke them on two occasions in the past: in his farewell address in May 1953, to the World Health Assembly, and in 1957 at Columbia University in a set of lectures which he collected into a book,