# Report from the Conference Rapporteur

*June Osborn*

I face the task of summarizing, in something less than twenty minutes, what it has taken literally dozens of experienced, thoughtful and committed people more than two days to say! Rather than do injustice by trying to truncate such rich discussion, I will focus my remarks on the plenary sessions—and on the phenomena of the gathering itself, noting as I do that the small group interactions were surely the richest of the formats, and acknowledging that the written or formally spoken word must, of necessity, fall short of the quality of human interaction achieved by the creative format of the Conference.

## Language: a Double-Edged Sword

I will proceed not *seriatim* but rather by visiting a mixture of themes and metaphors that I found particularly provocative. The first of these has to do with language. Peter Piot introduced the theme by pointing out that the time was right and the ground wonderfully fertile for human rights discussions because of the plethora of activists who had honed their commitment throughout the long hard years of AIDS but who had not had a chance to learn what he termed "the language of human rights." Noting that people long experienced in human rights were at hand to help, he charged both sides with the task of "translation into the REAL language of life itself," adding that the key components for success were tolerance and compassion.

But the potential duplicity of language as a tool was brought forth by Jack Geiger who enumerated the dreadful impending impact in the U.S. on our most vulnerable populations of so-called Welfare Reform legislation, recently enacted into law by the U.S. Congress and signed by the Presi-

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dent. After pointing out its disastrous disempowering effect on women, children and the profoundly disabled, he reminded us that the official name of the act was "The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Law of 1996" (which prompted him to comment that it was now clear that George Orwell was alive and well and living in Washington, DC).

As a devotee of language, the double-edge of its power has often intrigued me; and as the sessions wore on, even among this gathering of such like minds, I was occasionally aware of inadvertent verbal offense—over-inclusiveness that could wound religious sensibilities, or exclusionary inferences that sometimes seemed to brand all bearers of a Y chromosome as potentially dangerous cads. Indeed, we were reminded by the presentation of Morton Winston that words could be an early-warning component of surveillance for the developing clouds of institutionalized, intergroup violence. And Rachel Kyte told us, with delightful esprit, of the process of back-of-the-envelope definition whereby the word "sexuality" entered the lexicon of the Beijing documents.

In short, my respect for the power of language for both good and ill grew yet again. Its power to soar and inspire, to convey love and mutuality of feelings goes without saying. But clearly, it also provides a vehicle for the very kind of careless, easy intolerance we strive to diminish in our simultaneous quest for commonality and diversity. At the very least, it is clear that the old childhood chant, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me" is a badly flawed bit of folklore that serves us ill in this era of amplified communication.

## The Need to Diminish Abstraction

On a related matter quite close to the heart of the conference theme of "Ideas into Action," several speakers made reference to the need to proceed from abstraction to more concrete realities. In the context of rights, these discussions delved into the extant bodies of international law, which touch glancingly (or by inference only) on matters of health. In the context of health, it was well brought forth that the wonderfully full definition of health—that is, physical, social and mental well-being—needed to be refined at least enough to enable attention to accountability on the part of

states. And Jacqueline Pitanguy made the provocative and interesting observation that humanity was too abstract a concept, which, she noted, happily was slowly being replaced by a concrete aggregation of diverse, real individuals, and that this transformation was a necessary prerequisite to our ability to identify and, thus, to grapple with the specific issues posed by diversity in the context of health and human rights.

And finally, Simone Veil commented that democracy as a concept was "too abstract to protect individual citizens against [violations of] dignity." Her remark brought back to memory William Shirer's sad epitaph in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* for the Weimar Republic in the 1920s, the structure of which he so much admired—which I read nearly forty years ago: he reasoned that the brief post-war interval preceding fulminant inflation and demagogic intervention had been far too brief for people to learn to live democratically, however elegant the governmental construct might have been. The concept comes hauntingly to mind in the modern era replete with fresh efforts at democratization but bloody with its 22 wars ongoing, and should remind us that in a very real sense, as we strive for enhancement of citizenship and for human rights, we are, among other things, playing for time—time to learn to appreciate the collective benefit of fully realized human rights, including the flowering of human talent in the context of optimum health.

## Violence

There were some themes to which I want to point as being of particular timeliness and interest. The topic of violence—which not so long ago was excluded even from the arena of health in many quarters—commanded an entire plenary session. The awful recent histories of violence were brought forward in several ways. The organized, catastrophic violence of war and genocide were thoughtfully discussed by Morton Winston, who introduced an acronym—IIV—to stand for institutionalized intergroup violence, which he defined as organized systems of political aggression based on group identities, and which he identified as early warning phenomena presaging disasters of enormous, irreversible magnitude. Even as I was fussing to myself at yet-another acronym, he went on to point out that, just as HIV (transmitted, for in-

stance, in the context of unsafe sex) could be identified as a preventable predictor of AIDS, so IIV should also be viewed as a threat to public health and its recognition and effective containment could serve to prevent wider outbreaks of disastrous conflict and even genocide. He went on to summarize intriguing progress in the development by social science researchers both of early warning models of IIV and of early intervention techniques. I see that as a particularly hopeful harbinger of the fruits to come from the increasingly incisive and productive realms of social science focused on issues of human health and well-being.

Importantly, Jack Geiger broadened the concept of violence in a profound discussion of inequity. He noted that, in the United States, our perceptions of what constitutes violence are unduly restrictive. He suggested that "...many of the ugly features of inequity in American society [constitute] violence of a far greater magnitude" than the individually grotesque circumstances of "guns and gangs and rapes" that distract the media and dominate coverage. In a fascinating expansion of that theme he noted that much of the broader inequity was inextricably associated with a profoundly flawed concept of race; and that repeated exposure to false but powerful racial stereotyping is, in itself, a form of assault.

As an aside, Geiger also introduced a theme concerning the social foundations of the concept of public health that was revisited, in one of the smaller group discussions, by Allan Brandt—the origins of the thinking about public health introduced by Rudolph Virchow more than a century ago, in which the indivisibility of social context and individual health were well recognized. Brandt pursued the theme, noting that the introduction of the germ theory of disease at the end of the nineteenth century inadvertently (and in my mind paradoxically) shifted the focus to individual behavior, individual disease and the potential for blame. Brandt even suggested, provocatively, that some illnesses were in fact subtly considered to have a sort of "social good," citing for instance the concerns voiced when treatment for syphilis was at hand, that such easy cure would encourage condemned behavior. The echoes of that example rang in the awful 1980s with citations—almost celebrations in some quarters—of AIDS as God's punishment and they ring still, reminding us that we

have a major job to do to be sure that developing insights concerning behavioral components of disease causation do not become merely a vehicle to justify the response of censure and blame.

## Technology

Turning to a different set of themes, several discussions of technology and elements of conceptual advance caught my attention. Harvard University President Neil Rudenstine gave the twentieth century a mixed review, but noted in passing the extraordinary explosion of technologic capabilities, with side effects perhaps as profound as the halt in untrammeled escalation to global warfare. Simone Veil pointed to the decade of the seventies as "the golden age of medicine," and in a small group discussion of genetics, Michele Harvey detailed the positive contribution of DNA analysis to the unequivocal demonstration of human rights violations (in Argentina, Rwanda and elsewhere). But in that same session, the ominous intrusion of genetic over-interpretation on matters central to human rights and to health were brought forward as well, and the shadows of disclosure, discrimination and social harm lurked over the discussion at every phase. Clearly, new insights about usage and maintenance of thoughtful control must attend the benefits of such potent new revelatory techniques.

## The Right to Sexual Health and Sexuality

The themes of sexuality again received close attention in plenary session, and indeed throughout the meeting. The limited but real progress achieved in recent major congresses was delineated, with frequent reiteration of the need to expand still further to a fully developed assertion of sexual rights, beyond the gains of reproductive rights and gender equity where measurable progress may have occurred. Richard Parker perhaps summed up a lot of that complex (and still marginalized) area of rights deliberation by asserting that the goal should be a re-conceptualization of sexual health as a question of social justice. And even beyond health, it became clear that much work remains to be done in the broader arena of sexuality and human rights.

## Children

Finally, the topic of children was visited at intervals, and in a variety of ways, and very powerfully and inspiringly by Stephen Lewis. In a lovely quote from Abraham Lincoln, Jim Oleske brought out the patent but neglected fact that the children will, in fact, determine and define the future. Powerful concepts that deserve to dominate. At one point it was suggested that an emphasis on children's rights could serve as an attractive universal entry into a broader human rights discourse—that the issue of children seemed to evoke a readier humane response from people in power; yet as I noted earlier, Jack Geiger emphasized with sadness the backward slide of U.S. policy with respect to children's health and well-being. And, as both a mother and a pediatrician, I was set to musing—as I often have in the context of the AIDS epidemic—just what is the age that people assume is the "statute of limitations" on childhood? My three children are ages 28, 27 and 27—and they are still my children! In light of such obtuseness, I am afraid I do not think that the invocation of "childhood" can get us much farther than we can go by simply taking on the assertion (made very effectively by several speakers) that human rights must be approached as indivisible not only among themselves but among the subsets of age and gender of human beings. As a post-script, however, I just want to say that the ongoing easy disregard of children's rights gives me the shivers, for I actually carry in my wallet a quote from Longfellow: "Ah, what would the world be like if the children were no more? We should dread the desert behind us worse than the dark before."

## Final Remarks

A few final thoughts: someone said, early in the meeting, that the twentieth century was "slouching toward its conclusion." Maybe so, but I feel as though it were racing, heedlessly, almost centrifugally. A profound thinker of an earlier decade, the great physicist Leo Szilard, seemed to have had that feeling in the late thirties as he began to perceive the awesome and potentially awful power of nuclear knowledge and the impending need for its social containment. At one point he wrote his own set of "ten commandments" which were rescued from obscurity by a recent biographer in

a book called *Genius in the Shadows*. I really should carry them around since I like them all—but I remembered at least the essence of a few during our deliberations and will try to paraphrase. The first—which would make Virchow glad and should be a mantra for those of us on the health side of the equation and for all who practice the intellectual art of reductionism—is to remember the connectedness of things. Another, more suitable to those of us who must make things work and move politicians in the real world, is do not lie without need, and yet another: do not destroy what you cannot create. But the one I like the most came instantly to mind as Geeta Rao Gupta recounted her 7-year old daughter's utterly heartfelt wail about sexual inequality "But that's not fair!..." Szilard's commandment goes something as follows: "Love children, spend as much time with them as you can and listen faithfully to their every word." The inspiration and the warmth I have gained from these special days with all of you, focused by the echoing cry of a clear-eyed child that "that's not fair" (before her outrage is blunted by the fact that life can be very unfair), will give me the energy to go out again and maintain a durable commitment to health, to human rights, and to their inextricable interconnectedness.