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Director, PAHO
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PARTNERS IN PREVENTING VIOLENCE**
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Mr. Chairman:

First let me thank the Government of Colombia and the Mayor of Cartagena, for their support to this conference which could not have been held in a more beautiful setting. We in the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) are pleased that so many distinguished media practitioners accepted our invitation to attend. It sends a clear signal that you are as concerned as we are about the magnitude of the problem of violence in our societies and are committed to exploring means to address it. The first step in any productive partnership is dialogue and I am pleased that the agenda proposed will give the opportunity for this interchange between health and media professionals.

I am particularly gratified to welcome President Arias — a distinguished Nobel Laureate whose legendary commitment to human well-being is well known, and we have all lauded his efforts to secure peace and tranquility for people who had suffered through the violence of war and the atrocities that come in its wake. His country has the distinction of having innovated many of the underpinnings of democracy that we now see in Latin America and I look forward to the message he will bring us.

During the course of this conference you will explore various aspects of the actual and potential interaction between the media and health, perhaps from the operational point of view. I wish to dwell, at least initially, on the policy perspective as seen from my position as Director of the Pan American Health Organization. We have come to appreciate the truism that no major change in social policy or practice will take place without the intervention and interaction of the principal actors in our civil society. I place the media firmly among those actors and recognize that they have a double role to play as they exercise their capacity for action. The media have the power of a mirror that reflects, we hope faithfully, society and its many parts. There is no other more powerful mechanism for showing us what we are and what we do. But in addition, the media is an instrument that I liken to the hammer and chisel of the sculptor that are used or can be used to transform matter from one state to another.

Modern communication has made it possible that these two attributes now know no physical boundaries. It is no longer only the written word, but the images and sounds of television have multiplied and expanded the power of the media. We in the health sector who depend so much on communication, view these capabilities of the media with admiration and some envy and have firmly decided that we must make common cause.

* **Pan American Health Organization, Pan American Sanitary Bureau, Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization.**

** **International Conference on Prevention of Violence: Creative Media Opportunities.**

The Pan American Health Organization has as one of its fundamental principles the stimulation of work among countries, and we are convinced that this transmission of information about health is one of the means for shortening the distances among our countries and getting them to work together. We recognize only too well that the flow of images is bidirectional. When there is complaint about the influence of images from the developed countries of the North on the practices in the South, we hear that the images of the South, which come almost instantaneously to the North, also have an impact. Thus, we look to communication, and particularly the power of television, to facilitate our knowledge of all our countries by all our countries and assist us in our Pan American approach to problem solution.

It is because of the power and pervasiveness of the media that we are inviting you to think with us about this problem of violence. I will not repeat here the statistics about violence and the media. There are volumes of research that detail the acts of violence seen by children on television, the treatment of violence as regards health and the possibilities that violence frequently seen so dulls the senses that the young and impressionable are somehow deformed. The analogy is drawn with the loss of hearing the young suffer from being abused by modern music that is played to be felt rather than heard.

PAHO's approach to you is not one of assigning or even discussing culpability. I was struck by an address given recently by the Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission of the United States of America to the Directors of the National Association of Television Programmes Executives, on the subject of violence on television. He lamented the fact that *too much of American life is lived in a tragic wasteland of crime* and noted the increasing violence in our time. He called upon his audience to avoid the disingenuousness of denial and accept some measure of responsibility. The main burden of his argument was that the media could elect to address the problem of TV violence in the courts, bringing legal arguments to show that they were not responsible. The alternative was acceptance of some responsibility and the challenge of a creative response to the problem. As he put it, using the imagery of a fork in the road — one way is the path of denial and confrontation; the other way is the route to opportunity and renewal. Our policy in PAHO is to invite you to walk with us along the latter path.

The issue of violence has been incorporated within those areas with which we seek to cooperate with countries, and some of you may properly ask why a health agency has become involved in such a complex issue. First, because the effects of violence have a large impact on the functioning of the health services, by diverting for the treatment of the sequelae of violence, resources that might be used for other purposes. Violence kills. Mortality from causes associated with violence represents a significant proportion of total mortality. While we think of mortality from violence as predominantly affecting adult males, we should also note the health consequences of violence in children.

But in addition, we believe that the approach to prevention of violence or its treatment is no longer the sole and unique responsibility of juries and judges. We who work in health, seized as we are of the health impact of violence, have tried to bring to bear on the problem some of the tools and analyses that have served us well in approaching other problems. We acknowledge that these tools and the models to which they are applied may have limitations, and we are constantly searching to interact with other disciplines such as those of communication, for example, to develop other explanatory constructs and indicators for measuring the effectiveness of interventions.

Thus it was that two years ago PAHO organized the first Inter-American Conference on Society, Violence, and Health. In this conference, the participants from many disciplines and sectors brought home the role of health very clearly to us in the discussions and final declaration. We believe that the health sector can impact on some of the factors that trigger violence by promoting good mental health practices and teaching the essentials of conflict resolution.

But perhaps the most important area for action by the health sector is in the basic underlying cause of much domestic violence — poverty and social marginalization. I believe and we are increasingly able to show that health investment and attention to health can stimulate the kind of economic growth and foment the creation of the social capital that are necessary, if many of our citizens are to escape poverty. It is not only grinding poverty that breeds violence, but it is also the distributive injustice that is a contributing factor.

But it is not only distributive inequity or injustice in material terms that stimulates or favours violence. It is the inequity in terms of human to human relationships that also breeds violence, and this is seen most vividly in the domestic violence that leaves so many women battered, bruised and, betrayed by a society that superficially proffers respect for their role. There are suggestions that this violence against women is the norm rather than the exception and throughout known history it has been bedded in social, economic, cultural, and political inequalities. This violence is sometimes not helped by our justice systems and may indeed be perpetuated by the images that the mirror of television shows us. A more fundamental approach is necessary to show the pervasiveness of gender based discrimination, and I am sure that at some time during your conference you will hear what PAHO is doing in the area of health to bring out these inequities and hopefully reduce them.

Our role as a health agency is also to collect and provide good data, and I believe that we do this well. Through our presence in all the countries of the Americas and our access to the sources of production of statistics, we are in a favoured position to produce and analyze data. Our data collection is one mechanism that allows us to comment on the mortality induced by violence and to some extent on the health problems that are a manifestation of the social inequity to which I have referred before as the breeding ground for violence. But I would be the last to propose that we capture all or a large part of the violence related morbidity in our countries, simply because so much of it is unrecognized and unreported. We offer you in the media such information as we have, and offer also to collaborate with you in an analysis that may further enhance our several capacities to address this problem.

In an effort to inform myself on how best PAHO and you from the media might best work together, I have had to review some of the theoretical concepts of how you do indeed influence both personal and public health. A recent publication set out a framework that I found very attractive in that it portrayed the actions as being intended or unintended and each of these might have a positive or negative impact. In this construct it is claimed that a positive intended personal effect would be having persons designate a non-drinking driver after seeing TV characters do it. Similarly, at the public level, an intended effect may be the increased funding for a program or improved legislation stimulated by media attention.

This caused me to reflect on my own empirical observation of the TV images of violence and much of the written material that portrays violence. I have the impression that what is news is the fact of violence, and possible solutions are not the news or are not made interesting. Perhaps I am naive in thinking that in addition to portrayal of violence, which is inescapable in the societies, there might be

attempts also to show how it might be prevented or ameliorated. There is rarely a systematic approach to conflict resolution as a means of preventing violence.

I am convinced that it should not be beyond the capacity of media and health professionals to educate and entertain simultaneously. It should not be impossible to describe some of the problems related to domestic violence in such a way that is both entertaining and seeks to portray a message that is directed towards modification of behaviour. This cannot happen with all violence that is shown on television, but some approach of this type, I suggest, would give credence to the view that the media does have a social responsibility.

Of course, we in health also have a responsibility to promote advocacy of causes through the media and to overcome our reluctance to open ourselves and our ideas to the media practitioners. There are good stories to be told in health. There are good stories to be told about some practical steps being taken to document violence and prevent it.

I have every confidence that the conference will go well, and we in health as well as you in the media will leave here with a bit more than good intentions. I hope you leave here with some clearer idea of how our skills might be complementary, and in this case I do not wish to involve you in the whole spectrum of human behaviour that relates to health. I wish you to concentrate on a single issue — that of prevention of violence, because it is really a topic that is big enough to engage all your creative energies now and for some time to come.