Comments on the paper

ADMINISTRATIVE AND OPERATIONAL STRUCTURE OF A NUTRITIONAL EPIDEMIOLOGICAL SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM*

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The paper presented by Dr. Aranda-Pastor settles the bases for the administrative and operational structure of a food and nutritional surveillance system. The systematic and exhaustive treatment which he has applied to the development of the subject could only be complemented with a model to implement its practical functioning in a given country or area. And leaving aside the fact that this would mean our departing from the purposes of the central subject, its design could only be made in each particular case taking into account the different structures and infrastructures existing in the place where it is to be applied.

Hence, I shall limit myself to formulate some general comments for underlining the objectives that the speaker has assigned to the system presented, and the concepts and elements used by him for its administrative and operational structure.

1. Objectives and Aims of an Epidemiological Surveillance System

My experience in the epidemiological surveillance activities in other fields and in the development and perfectioning of the systems to comply with them, has led me to the following conviction. Unless consensus is obtained as to the purpose of the surveillance, and the great majority of those integrating the surveillance subsystem and the health system - including the high decision levels - have a clear view of their objectives and potential use, it is not possible to achieve an effective surveillance.

The previous considerations lead me to state that as pointed out by the document we are commenting on, the nutritional epidemiological surveillance should have the following objectives:

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1. Make a permanent and dynamic diagnosis of the food and nutritional situation of the community and of its conditioning factors.

2. Forecast changes at short, medium and long range, both of the food and nutritional situation and of their conditioning factors.

3. Assess the effect of programs already under way to improve the system and to modify the conditioning factors.

All of the above-mentioned points lead to one purpose: provide timely information and not "historical" data and formulate recommendations at the decision levels which serve for the planning process and for the adoption of immediate measures capable of correcting or controlling special situations detected or predictable by means of the permanent and dynamic surveillance process.

2. Surveillance as an Information System

These objectives and purposes characterize the epidemiological surveillance as an information subsystem which in the context of this Colloquium, and as pointed out by Dr. Aranda-Pastor, constitutes the information subsystem of the information system, decision, control of the food and nutritional situation, and of their conditioning factors.

They also imply that surveillance must promote actions. This is why the epidemiologists of the Center for Disease Control of the United States, in particular Michel Greg, define epidemiological surveillance as the information for action.

Maybe I have extended somewhat on these comments, running the risk of repeating concepts already expressed in the same form or with different words by the speakers and commentators who preceeded me. However, this is only because, as I indicated previously, from the understanding and active acceptance of the objectives and purposes of the surveillance, and the need of information to take decisions and execute actions, shall depend the decision for structuring administratively and operationally the food and nutritional surveillance systems and their use in the adoption of decisions, planning, programming and execution of preventive and control measures.

3. Importance of the Surveillance of Conditioning Factors

In emphasizing the objectives of epidemiological surveillance, we pointed out the diagnosis and prognosis of the situation and of its conditioning factors. I wish now to stress the primary importance that the diagnosis and prognosis of the conditioning factors have. This tailor's drawer that the semantics of programming in health calls conditioning factors, comprises all of the possible causal and contributing agents that, whatever the causal relation, constitute a more or less structured constellation better or worse known according to the complexity of the phenomenon, its natural

history, and our own knowledge. Nevertheless, their variations and modifications will determine immediate or variable term changes in the situation of the phenomenon which, in the present case, is the food and nutritional situation. To detect these variables and foresee their effect on the situation is the essence of the epidemiological surveillance and the scientific basis for deciding and executing timely actions and programs aimed to prevent undersirable consequences.

4. Determinant Effect of the Multisectoral Origin of the Conditioning Factors of the Food and Nutritional Situation for Structuring the Surveillance System

The information systems conform and operate through an aggregate of activities which are grouped together in the following subaggregates: 1) production of data; 2) collection and transmission; 3) processing; 4) analysis and interpretation. The inputs of the system are the data and previous knowledge, and the product is the information which must be divulged for its use. This brief analysis of an information system, together with the obvious fact that, due to the multiplicty of conditioning factors, production of pertinent and relevant data for the food and nutritional surveillance has its origin in all the social and economic sectors, demonstrate the need for the surveillance system to be of a multisectoral nature.

Given the characteristics of the problem, it would be impossible to talk of a real surveillance if, in the analysis or interpretation of the data, all of them and each of the involved sectors were not taken into account.

This fundamental aspect of the problem has been highly taken into consideration by the speaker. It is precisely because of this that he proposes a multisectoral system with a Central Unit with sufficient hierarchy to achieve the obtainance of data from all of the involved sectors, so that the recommendations are of direct access to the high decision levels of each one of them.

At no moment does the multisectoral character of the system mean the structuring of a superimposed super-system. On the contrary, as Dr. Aranda-Pastor pointed out, it rather is the equivalent of the utilization of the data and information systems of each one of the sectors.

At this point it seems important to call attention to the fact that whatever the information subsystem, all of the sectors integrating the system participate, whether this be the health, agriculture or other sector, and that motivation of their participation is vital to achieve an effective surveillance. In particular, the more generalized participation is that related to the production of data, and this will only improve in the measure in which the data producers see their usefulness and are satisfied with the use made of them.

5. Control of the Functioning of the System

In recommendation No. 8 the speaker attributes to the Central Unit the evaluation and supervision of the system, which means the same as saying that it is necessary

that at such level there exists control for the functioning of the system. This is a fundamental point to consider in the administative and operational structure of a surveillance system. I shall now end my comments by pointing out that experience in other fields has demonstrated that surveillance units, no matter what their level is, have to add to their specific activities, others that guarantee the production of data of acceptable quality, their timely transmission, their adequate processing to convert them in interrelated and comparable indicators, and be presented for their analysis and interpretation.

Lastly I wish to mention that it will be necessary to evaluate at all moments if the recommendations formulated by the surveillance system are taken into account by the decision levels. Also, it should be ascertained that they originate actions, since the fundamental justification of surveillance and the reason for its being, is that the information it generates gives way to the adoption of preventive or control measures.