

THE TERM *MYCOBACTERIUM HANSENI* IS OUR CHOICE

EDITORIAL

The Government organs of the State of S. Paulo, Brazil, directly or indirectly responsible for the publication of "Hansenologia Internationalis", have preferred the term *Mycobacterium hansenii* (Feldman, 1953 U.S.*) for the agent of hanseniasis. As detailed in an article in this issue (p. 71) this preference coincided with the viewpoints of the majority of the Scientific Council and Editorial Board of the periodical, and of a representative group of University professors of the country, completely independent from the publishers.

Therefore, the name *Mycobacterium leprae*, qualified by Feldman as "ignominious", is definitely cast out from the editorial pages of this periodical. Our last ties with the opprobrious pejorative "lepra" — "the most negative of all medical terms", "the disintegrator of the patient's personality", "the label which blocks education", "the continued psychic pain and trauma", according to extensive inquiries in the U.S., Argentina and Brazil — have finally been severed.

We are thankful to all who have cooperated with their responses for that severance to occur, and to the First Congress of Hansenology of the Endemic Countries and Third Brazilian Congress of Hansenology (Rio, 1980) which have accepted *Mycobacterium hansenii* as a synonym for the old

M. leprae. With this acceptance we see our choice quite well protected against inevitable criticism.

We call the attention of the Ministries of Health or Public Health Services of countries which have already banished the infamous pejoratives "lepra", "leprosy" and "lebbra" — Brazil, United States, Italy, Portugal, Bolivia, Jamaica and Trinidad/Tobago — to the danger represented by the "ignominious" *M. leprae* to their terminological breakthroughs.

We beg to appeal to the International Committee of Systematic Bacteriology and to the Societies of Bacteriology of the whole world to study the grave moral, social, medical and preventive problems resulting from the permanence of the "bacteriological stigma" in the endemic Christian countries. We understand that there is no taxonomical confusion regarding *M. leprae* which might imply a terminological change, according to the strict rules of the International Committee. There is, however, a much more serious confusion with the biblical "lepra" — a ritually defiling condition of stones, walls, garments and people, which has nothing in common with hanseniasis (Hansen's disease). A confusion which continues due to all the deep-rooted and irremovable loathsome and degrading connotations that the biblical "lepra" has conserved throughout the ages.

(*) FELDMAN, W.H. Hansenosis for leprosy. *J. American Med. Assoc.*, 153:1041, 1953.

As aptly pointed out by one of the respondents to the inquiry of p. 71 "although there is no taxonomical confusion, there is confusion in the head of the patient and in society". This confusion is responsible for the shame, the hiding, the aggravation of the disease and of the endemic.

Last, but not least, it might be time to study the possibility of a well-deserved homage to the Norwegian scientist whose name has been unjustifiably dissociated from the bacillus he discovered, and, in most countries, from the disease to whose knowledge he so much contributed.

A. ROTBERG