

NATIONAL CANCER ASSOCIATION

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS BY DR. LEWIS S. ROBERTSON

At the annual general meeting of the National Cancer Association of South Africa, which was held in Johannesburg on 23 August 1957, the adoption of the annual report and accounts for 1956 was moved by the President, Dr. Lewis S. Robertson.

After speaking in terms of high appreciation of what the Association owed to the late Mr. Hugh R. Solomon, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, who was still alive at the previous annual meeting, and referring to the Association's need for more funds, Dr. Robertson said that the Association went forward with confidence in the importance of the cause, and determined year by year to intensify the efforts made to solve the riddle of cancer and to end the misery and fear which that word evoked in the past.

The problem of cancer is the concern of the whole world. As far as our present information is concerned, about 10% of cancer cases are completely cured, a further 20% could be cured by full application of all presently available knowledge on case detection, diagnosis and treatment, and the remainder, 70%, represent the size of the research problem.

Education of the Public

In this connection we are brought face to face with a problem which is exercising critical minds in many parts of the world, namely the education of the public in matters relating to cancer. This is a question which is of great concern to the Association and the effects of public education, where this has been practised, is being studied in all its aspects. With the information available at present, the Association is in a position to adjudicate on the problem; to decide how far on the one hand education of the public will bring the patient to the doctor when the disease is in a curable stage, and on the other hand how far it may generate fear in people unaffected by cancer. Educating the public is like declaring war. There is no backing out once it has started and the issue can only be one of victory or defeat. As in declaring war it is a problem not only of 'whether', but of 'how' and of 'when'.

In research throughout the world, the greatest volume of research is devoted to treatment of cancer.

The relation between smoking and cancer has received blazing publicity, not to say notoriety. Work of great importance in this field has been a statistical survey into tobacco smoking and the relation of atmospheric pollution to lung cancer. According to several research workers the death rate for cancer of the lung increases in proportion to the number of cigarettes smoked per week. At a rough estimate it appears that about half the deaths of men from lung cancer arise from cigarette smoking. The problem of the deleterious effects of smoking is a huge one, but no authoritative emphatic statement can be made at present on the matter.

The Association has established a film library dealing with different aspects of cancer, and there has been a good demand for the loan of professional films. Libraries attached to medical schools have been provided with several scientific journals bearing on cancer. The distribution of pamphlets to the public has continued unabated and favourable comments have been received on their contents and the manner of presentation of the subject matter contained in them.

The Association is particularly concerned about the influence of unqualified persons treating patients suffering from cancer; and efforts are being made to impress upon cancer sufferers the dangers they run by entrusting themselves to unqualified persons in the treatment of such a serious disease, thereby jeopardizing their chances of subsequent cure.

Members are no doubt impressed by the amount of research work sponsored by the Association. In due course the results of these investigations will be available.

Cobalt Bombs and Linear Accelerators

The question of the acquisition of cobalt bombs and linear accelerators for installation in the main hospitals in the principal centres of South Africa has been kept under continual review both through correspondence with overseas authorities and by discussions with distinguished experts in this field who have visited South Africa. Because of the controversial nature of the subject as it affects South Africa, the Association has obtained the advice of leading authorities in Britain. They are in favour

of large hospitals obtaining radio-active cobalt bombs, but all stressed that, before embarking on the installation of such equipment, hospital authorities must ensure that they have available adequately trained and experienced medical personnel and physicists for the operation of cobalt bombs and supervoltage machines. A report of the Medical Research Council of Great Britain recently received, supports the views of the authorities consulted.

The attitude adopted by the National Cancer Association endorsed by these eminent authorities, is that it cannot support the purchase of radio-active cobalt bombs unless specially trained and experienced personnel to handle the equipment are available. The Association has noted with satisfaction that South African physicists are being sent abroad for training in the handling of super-voltage and radio-active equipment and to gain experience in the techniques of super-voltage radiotherapy.

Information has been obtained from authorities in Britain that radio-active cobalt will not be available for shipment to South Africa until the latter half of 1958 and no radio-active caesium will be available until 1960. By that time the position in regard to the availability of trained personnel to handle super-voltage equipment should have materially altered. The more powerful super-voltage linear accelerator of the 25-million-electron-volt type is reported to have many advantages over a thousand curie cobalt bomb. It can be used for various other purposes, such as generating a beam of free electrons, to make isotopes and produce neutron rays. The cost of such a machine is in the region of £80,000 and, in addition, the necessary buildings would cost approximately £30,000. The National Cancer Association considers that the time is not ripe for it to support the purchase of a machine of this description.