

The *Bulletin* turns 60: the early years

This year the World Health Organization (WHO) marks its 60th anniversary. Brigit Ramsingh takes a look at the origins of the *Bulletin*, WHO's flagship periodical. This is the first article in a series about the history of our journal.

History, at least as it relates to international organizations, is often made in anonymous meeting rooms that look a bit the same all over the world. Indeed, the conception of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* was as ordinary as its subsequent achievements as a scientific journal are remarkable.

Over the past 60 years, the *Bulletin* has become synonymous with WHO but in 1946 it was merely one item on the agenda of meetings of the Interim Commission, which was charged with establishing a new United Nations international health agency.

The commission met over the period 1946–48, once in New York and several times in Geneva.

When the *Bulletin* appeared in January 1948, the Interim Commission had high hopes for the new publication. "There would seem to be no reason why the *Bulletin* should not ultimately take its place among leading medical journals of the world," the Interim Commission said, in its supplementary report to the First World Health Assembly of June to July 1948.

Within the first 10 years, the new journal had firmly established itself as an authoritative source of international medical and public health information. Its stated goal was "to advance the work of the organization by bringing to the knowledge of medical and public-health workers articles of international significance on subjects within the scope of WHO's interests and activities."

Sixty years later, the *Bulletin* has taken its place among the world's leading health journals. In 2006, the journal achieved an impact factor of five, placing it fifth in the ISI Web of Knowledge's category of the most cited public, environmental and occupational health journals.

The *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* was originally conceived as a monthly periodical. In as much as WHO evolved from *l'Office international d'hygiène publique* (OIHP), which was established in 1907, and from the League of Nations set up in

1919, the new journal's form and content were largely based on elements of two predecessors: the *Bulletin mensuel de l'Office international d'hygiène publique* and the *Bulletin of the League of Nations Health Organization*.

At the First World Health Assembly, the Interim Commission envisaged that the new journal – the first two issues of which had already appeared – would benefit from "ready access to experts of all countries" working at WHO and that its subject matter would be "concerned with health problems ... of prime importance."

Although publication of the first issue actually predates WHO by a few months, the *Bulletin* also turns 60 this year. And, just like WHO itself, the *Bulletin* has undergone various transformations. The history of the *Bulletin* is as multifaceted as the organization itself: it has roots in older pre-WHO publications, has expanded its scope and content, and subsumed other journals to reach a wider audience.

The *Bulletin* you read today is the result of a 60-year evolution from the "principal scientific organ of the WHO" to the "international journal of public health".

The Interim Commission called for the *Bulletin* to be developed as a "substantial publication of the highest standard". With its scope "as broad as that of WHO itself", the journal should become "a vehicle for significant studies, from whatever source, on all subjects which are of relevance to the international approach to health problems – not excluding the study and discussion of international health work as a subject in itself".

The editorial service of the new health organization was small, however, with only about 35 staff for all editorial, translation and publishing activities. They were responsible for all the inherited and new WHO publications, including: the *Official Records*, the *International Digest of Health Legislation*, the *Chronicle of the WHO*, the *Weekly Epidemiological Record*, the *Epidemic and Vital Statistics Report*.

The first issue of the *Bulletin* was edited by Dr Joseph Fabre, and, although it was scheduled to appear in 1947, it was published in January 1948. Number 1, volume 1 of the *Bulletin* included articles on the burning issues of the day: biological standardization, immunity reaction to the smallpox vaccine, and tuberculosis and malaria in Greece.

Fabre then handed over editorial responsibility for the journal to WHO's chief medical editor during the Interim Commission, Dr Norman Howard-Jones, who brought out the second issue later in 1948.



The Interim Commission, which was charged with establishing the United Nations health agency that eventually became WHO, discussed the possibility of publishing a journal to promote its work several times at meetings from 1946 to 1948.

WHO

Howard-Jones was appointed director of the Division of Editorial and Reference Services in September 1948 and continued to edit the *Bulletin* with his team during the early years, but neither his name nor that of Fabre appeared in the journal. Indeed, the editor's name did not appear on the masthead until the journal was relaunched as the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization: the international journal of public health* under its editor-in-chief Richard Feachum in 1999.

The plan had been for the *Bulletin* to appear quarterly in 1947, to report on the work of the Interim Commission, and then, in 1948, to switch to a monthly publication rhythm as the *Bulletin of the WHO*, like the OIHP's *Bulletin mensuel*. But during the early years the *Bulletin* did not appear as frequently as planned. The first volume contained only two issues and the journal's production was "virtually suspended" due to "other commitments", according to a report to the Interim Commission. These circumstances also led Fabre to date the first issue 1947/1948 without specifying the month.

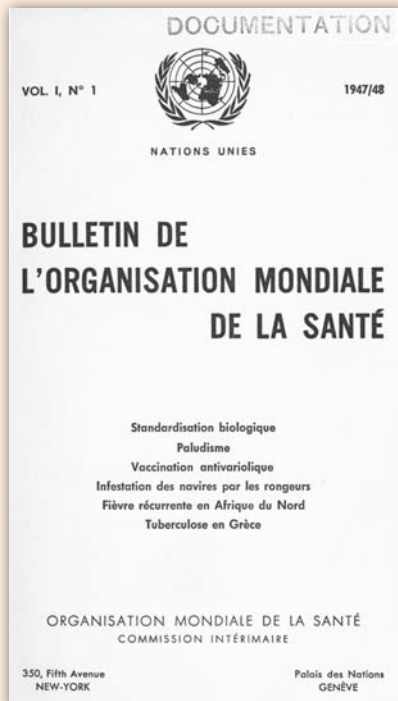
However, this did not impede the monitoring and coverage of impor-



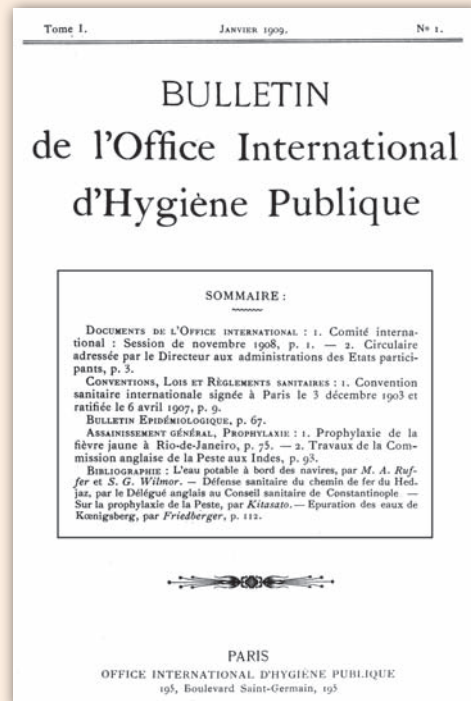
The Interim Commission met in Geneva in 1946. From left are Professor A Stampar, a consultant to the commission and Dr Brock Chisholm, first Director-General of WHO.

tant public health events as WHO responded to crises such as the cholera epidemic in Egypt, which started in September 1947. This event was reported in the second issue of the *Bulletin's* first volume by Dr Aly Tewfik

Shousha Pasha, the first chairman of the WHO Executive Board. His account remains an important historical document of the first emergency the new agency faced. ■



Volume 1, issue 1 of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 1947/1948.



The *Bulletin mensuel de l'Office international d'hygiène publique* was one of the predecessors of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*.

Source: WHO Archives