When the Association was established in 1989, an emphasis was placed equally on two main objectives:

1. Ties. We pledged to maintain ties among ourselves, with WHO, and, last but not least, with our serving colleagues.

2. Support. We pledged to support former staff and families, committing ourselves to the principle of defense of their interests.

As I start my mandate as chairman, and in further support of colleagues, I see a need for a basic publication that will cover topics important to us all, such as health insurance, pensions, taxes, wills. To proceed in this task, I seek your advice and assistance of you. Write me.

This is also the right moment to thank my predecessors for their devotion and work and to recognize what has been accomplished since our Association was established.

In the first place, our membership has grown to about 900 which is more than half of the 1,700 former staff throughout the world. For those in the Geneva area, a self-help group has been established; outings have been organized. The annual reunion, the event more than any other that brings former and serving colleagues together, has been held eight times, with some 200 attending in November. For those outside the area, our links are maintained mainly through this newsletter.

In pursuit of our second aim, the defense of colleagues, the Association wrote to the Director-General in October 1993 pointing out the inequality of health premiums. It will continue to seek premiums that are “fair.” Colleagues hard hit by the recent increase, which were substantial for some pensioners, have been asked to advise the Association.

Just as important, the Association has responded to individual needs — supporting a colleague over the issue of time limits for removal of household goods; helping another after she was robbed (almost blind, she had come to Geneva for medical care); assisting the widow of a colleague to return her husband’s body home in less than 24 hours after a sudden death (he had come from Pakistan to appear before the WHO appeals board).

To conclude, I reiterate the pledge I made in my statement for election to the committee, which is to “follow up individual cases ... with the administration, and other appropriate authorities.”

This is only proper for we are an Association of people. As people give life and meaning to principle, it is people most of all who count.

— R. Pal, Chairman

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ARGUING AGAINST TAXES (PENSIONS & SALARIES)

(The following are excerpts of an article carried in Union, ILO’s staff magazine, that calls upon the International Court of Justice to determine the legality of taxes on pensions and salaries. For the full text, with 13 foot-notes, call the Association: 791 3103, mornings. —Editor)

Do you know that your pension which is financed from contributions that have already been taxed by your organisation, is subject to income tax in a number of countries?

Do you know that neither your salary nor your pension should be taxed at the national level?

Here are some of the reasons why not.

The time seems to be ripe to remind people that — for a reason as valid for our salaries as for our pensions — no member state of the ILO has the right to levy taxes on this category of income.

Fiscal immunities accorded the ILO are based on the principle of equality among member states. A state levying taxes on funds contributed by all the member states would thus be recuperating, at least in part and possibly with a net profit, its contribution to the budget of ILO.

It would be improperly enjoying a privileged position, making the other states contribute to its own national budget. All member states must therefore refrain from raising such taxes.

The immunities and privileges the organisation needs in order properly to fulfil its mission are not based on the same principles as those governing diplomatic immunities. Diplomatic immunities are based on the principle of reciprocal courtesy between nations; the organisation is entitled to the immunities by right.

Adhesion to an organisation and to its constituent instrument is equivalent to adherence to a treaty. A state's obligation to exempt from national taxation funds contributed by all the member states comes into effect immediately. It is a requirement touching the very fabric and operation of the organisation.

The grounds for the fiscal immunities of an organisation are applicable also to officials. The basic criterion is the origin of the funds. Our salaries and pensions are paid out of funds made available jointly by member states: they therefore must not be taxed by any individual member state. That our pensions would not be taxable at the national level was a foregone conclusion to the experts who set up our pension system.

The principle of equality among member states gains in importance today, since the majority ... are countries which are disadvantaged economically and which it is intended should contribute proportionally less ... to the budget. Thus, if states that are comparatively better off levy a tax on our salaries and pensions, they are guilty of two violations: they violate the principle of equality as well as the social objectives of the United Nations system.

Moreover, countries refusing to exempt from national taxation the salaries and pensions of international civil servants are in contradiction with their own international fiscal law. In relations between states, remuneration (salary or pension) paid by a given state in respect of services rendered to that state may only be taxed by that state.

For the most part officials themselves seem to be unaware of the ... key points concerning taxation. Some believe that the tax already levied on them by their organisation during active service is purely fictitious. In fact this is not so, and indeed the tax levied is abnormally high. How many realise that the contributions they have paid to the Pension Fund, and will in due course receive back in the form of a pension, have already been taxed?

Many believe that fiscal immunities are a matter of diplomatic privilege, which explains why the immunity ceases once they are no longer in active service. Imagining, erroneously, that they have been benefiting from a privilege, they make no effort to defend their legitimate interests.

Moreover, believing — again erroneously — that the disputes over fiscal immunities are to avoid the payment of any tax at all, there are some who believe they are demonstrating their sense of civic responsibility by condemning them. The truth is that they are only showing their ignorance about the organisation.

Two fundamental principles are at stake in this matter of the taxation: equality among states, and equal treatment of the officials. To defend the exclusive right of the organisations to levy tax on the monies they pay out is the only way to ensure respect for these principles. In this instance the interests of the officials coincide strictly with those of the organisation. The representatives of serving staff and of retired officials must assume a major responsibility for defence of this right.

Surely the time has come to confront the competent bodies of the organisations of the U.N. system with what is really at stake, and to seek an opinion of the International Court of Justice.

—Rolande Cuvillier

ILO
**FISC in France**

(1) TAKING AIM AT SERVING STAFF

The Hexagon has got staff of U.N. specialised agencies who live in neighbouring France in its sights! After 47 years of delay, Paris has decided to sign the 1947 Convention (on the Privileges and Immunities of the Specialised Agencies of the United Nations), which has been ratified by all U.N. Member States. This puts staff of the agencies in the same boat as those of the U.N. In sum: no matter where in the world, officials must receive the same fiscal treatment. "But France proposes certain reservations to this Convention and will introduce a system of tax credits equivalent to a double taxation," according to Francis Maupin, legal counsellor at the ILO.

This news comes as no surprise. "For 18 months, the French government has been divided between the Ministry of Finance, which wanted to tap this rich fiscal vein, and the Foreign Affairs Ministry, which preferred not to upset the status quo," explains Michel de Bonnecorse, French Ambassador to the U.N. in Geneva. The die is not yet cast. The French parliament will only decide next spring.

In the interim, the departments of Ain and Haute-Savoie (where most internationals live) will do everything they can to put their regional point of view across to the government. "It's scandalous," says Pascal Meylan, Mayor of Ferney. "There has been no prior discussion with the communes concerned." For them, this fiscal measure will do nothing for their communal budgets. But by penalising the international residents, Paris risks driving them out to Geneva. "Even if they don't pay income taxes, they keep the local economy going," says Meylan.

"No panic," replies Michel de Bonnecorse. "There is unlikely to be any great migration of international civil servants. Rents are 25 per cent cheaper than in Switzerland, and the cost of living is also lower." The ILO meanwhile is sounding out its employees on whether they might eventually wish to remove to Geneva.

—May Piaget

(Excerpted from Tribune de Genève 22-23 Oct 1944)

(2) THE BATTLE CONTINUES

A letter from ILO's Director-General, Michel Hansenne, written in the name of seven U.N. specialised agencies, addressed to the French Mission in Geneva politely declines a meeting with a delegation from that country.

"We are not refusing to discuss," insists Francis Maupin, ILO's legal counsel. "At present, there is nothing like a true dialogue... We were hoping to sit down around a table to define the parameters of this new taxation. But we have the impression that the modalities have already been fixed."

It seemed to the agencies that the delegation wanted to explain the implications and not to provide the clarification requested. "We don't want to put the cart before the horse," says Maupin. "We need time to analyse before we meet with a delegation..."

The agencies are in a state of alarm. "We are going to demand a consultation with Prime Minister (Edouard Balladur) so that we can sit down properly around the negotiating table," Maupin says. The fact remains that no one is capable of providing good estimates of just how much this new fiscal measure could add to the coffers of France.

—May Piaget

(Excerpted from Tribune de Genève 27 Oct '94)
It is mid-February 1994. I arrive at the Jan Smuts International Airport, neat, orderly, and underutilized, in Johannesburg. I am in South Africa for the first time, as a member of the U.N. Observation Mission (UNOMSA).

I am assigned to Ellisras, a sub-provincial town in western Northern Transvaal on the border with Botswana, where the land is flat and dry, like the American West. Only 130 black families live there among a total population of 10,000. In the township nearby of Marapong and, in the sub-district of Mokerong I, everyone is black. Ellisras has an adequately-staffed, and generously-supplied hospital. The white and main entrance to the hospital is closed. Now all traffic enters through what had been the black, and service, gateway. The Ellisras staff are accepting change and the dramatic enlargement of its responsibilities.

Our first assignment is to meet representatives from all the political parties, civil and security officials, and other community leaders. All during our stay, we enjoy rural hospitality: the welcome mat out and tables lavishly spread. We are outsiders who are able to enter at the very top of social and official hierarchies.

We check the sites chosen as voting stations in an electoral district that covers 25,000 square kilometers and includes 234,000 persons, or nine per square kilometer. Working from preliminary drafts of voting station names, we identify roads often missing from highway maps, settlements that frequently have two or more official and colloquial names, none of which are generally known in the next settlement. We become experts on the byways of our district, especially in Mokerong I.

We are U.N. observers to the first all-race election in South Africa — the first in its 350 years of history. The quiet dedication of black and white, who volunteer as election officials, is impressive. One person is hospitalized with pneumonia the day before the polls open; his wife immediately takes over.

There is little violence in the country and absolutely none in our district. We marvel at the patience, and joy, of voters, despite the long lines in often beating rain or searing sun. My most vivid memory is of the mobile site at Elmeston, on route R510. The team sets up on the wide, grassy shoulder beside the highway.

A donkey cart moves cautiously along, the reins held by a solemn young boy. In the back, is an old woman, dressed in her finest blue gown, her head covered with a gay green, orange, and red bandana. Many hands lift her from the cart, carrying her to the head of the voting line. Too bent to stand, or even sit, she is placed gently on the ground.

Mrs Seikgosa Emmie Seromula, born (according to her tattered identity card) on 1 April 1910, then casts the first ballot in her life. Soon after the young man takes her home, slowly driving away, turning onto the dirt road leading into the red, dusty hills.

This may be her last vote, but the next time, or the time after that, the young driver will have his chance.

Later, I treat myself to a trip from Johannesburg to Cape Town on the Blue Train, which rivals the Orient-Express. Although capacity is about 90 passengers, there are only 18 on board, all treated in high opulence and served with extreme courtesy.

"Magic" is the favourite adjective of the train's splendidly attired director. He applies it to the weather, the train itself, the destination, the food, and his passengers. We do not complain.

—Jere Kilker

(Formerly INF, Geneva & U.N.)

(Since his departure from WHO “on account of the rules” in 1992, the writer served with the U.N. mission in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1993. South Africa was his second mission as an information officer-cum-elections specialist. —Editor)
Health Corner

SHRINKING

We were sipping our two-weekly espresso; Albert was quite upset. “Imagine,” he said, “I went to see my doctor, just for a check-up. ‘Do you know your weight and height,’ he asked. Of course I do, it’s ideal: 73 kilograms and 173 centimeters, as ever since my forties. ‘Well, let us check it,’ he said, looking at me somewhat queerly, and put me on his balance with a scale. ‘Your weight is correct’ — of course, I knew that, having stepped on my own scale in the bathroom that morning — ‘but you are only 169 centimeters tall!’ Now, tell me, what is happening to me, am I shrinking? Am I becoming, as the French say, a petit vieux?”

Yes, Albert, you are shrinking; many of us are shrinking. Our bones, seemingly passive and solid structures, are very much alive, with a constantly active metabolism. Calcium and proteins, as well as phosphorus, fluoride, and many other components, are constantly entering and leaving our bones. Bone cells are being incessantly destroyed by so-called osteoclasts, but are also being re-born from another type of cells, the osteoblasts.

The overall condition of the bones depends on a balance between the process of destruction and reformation; with increasing age and decreasing activity, our bones may become poorer in minerals and proteins, less dense, more porous, and also more fragile. This process, osteoporosis, is one of those numerous borderline conditions between health and disease. (There are also frankly pathologic forms of osteoporosis, less frequent, special diseases, but these do not concern Albert’s case.)

One would be almost tempted to say that osteoporosis is part of normal ageing. It usually starts around 45-50 years in women, and around 60-65 years in men. Part of normal ageing — perhaps; but is it part of healthy ageing? Osteoporosis is a multifactorial, largely preventable, condition. Physical activity stimulates not only the heart and vessels, muscles, lungs and metabolism, but promotes the renewal of bone cells, too. A balanced diet provides, especially with milk and cheese, the calcium needed to avoid undue loss from the bones, and vitamin D. If needed, but only if needed, these and other substances or drugs can be added but, then, where is the limit between healthy ageing and medicalized ageing?

After all, what is wrong with becoming a petit vieux or, for that matter, a petite vieille? Well, Albert, if you want my advice: join me when I am walking. This is the best physical activity for pensioners like us. Walking will do some good also to your bones.

—Tom Strasser, M.D. (formerly CVD)

CHANGES, CHANGES, (MORE)

The following are recent staff appointments:

Control of Tropical Diseases: • Dr Kazem Behbehani, formerly Programme Manager and Manager of I-CHEM Steering Committee, Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, has been appointed as Director, Division of Tropical Diseases (following the retirement of Dr Pieter de Raadt).

BiologicaLes • Dr Elwyn Griffiths, formerly Senior Scientist in the National Institute for Biological Standards and Control, U.N., has been appointed as Chief, Biologicals (following the retirement of Dr David Magrath).

Cabinet of the D-G: • Dr Mario Gonzalez, formerly WHO Representative in Viet Nam, has been appointed as Executive Officer in the D-G’s cabinet.

Interagency Affairs: • Dr Ferdinand Z. Littaua, formerly Executive Officer in the D-G’s cabinet has been appointed as Senior External Relations Officer, Division of Interagency Affairs.

Emergency and Humanitarian Action: • Mr Charles-Henri Lamunière has been appointed as Senior Adviser for External Relations and Coordination in the Division of Emergency and Humanitarian Action. He was formerly Director and Deputy to the U.N. Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Department of Humanitarian Affairs, Geneva.

Oral Health: • Dr Guennadi N. Pakhomov has been designated Acting Chief, Oral Health (following the appointment of Dr David E. Barmes formerly Chief, as Associate Director, Division of Noncommunicable Diseases).

Blood Safety: • Dr Jean Emmanuel, formerly Scientist, Global Programme on AIDS, has been designated Acting Chief of the newly established Blood Safety unit within the Programme on Health Technology.
LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

The sons of two former staff are professional colleagues at the Cantonal Hospital in Geneva. The family name of one is Mahler; his father was the D-G. The other is Khan; his dad was chief, psychotropic drugs. When they meet down the corridors, they hail each other as "brothers" in WHO, according to Khan Sr.

That has led him to suggest that the offspring of others might also feel the same warmth, and that there might be a first-ever gathering of them. "To begin, we need to know how many live in the area," he says in a letter asking the Association's support of his idea. "We can then arrange for them to meet one evening, and then to take it from there: to get together from time to time, or to even form an association of kids of former staff. They have WHO in common."

(Sounds like an idea worth exploring. Reaction from sons and daughters now welcome. — Editor)

ANYTHING BUT RETIRED

• René Collas, formerly AFRO, 1963-84, has written "Les chemins retrouvés: Mémoires d'un homme ordinaire," an account of youthful days at St Etienne ("Saintève" as locals say), from 1924 to 1944 seen through the eyes of one Joseph Molineaux. Ostensibly fiction, it is, in fact, highly autobiographical, depicting times before and during World War II that the author knew intimately. In French, naturally, but written so clearly, it is a fairly easy read for Anglophones, particularly to the perpetually devoted student. For a copy send 30 CHF or 125 FF to 20 rue de Lancry, Paris, 75010.

"In my desk drawer, I have material for a sequel, as well as for other writings, which one day I would hope to publish," the author says in a letter showing that he is anything but "retired," and far from "un homme ordinaire."

• Nils Dahlqvist, formerly external relations, submitted a report entitled "Global Welfare: the Role of Health," to the 26th World Conference on Social Welfare held July 1994 in Tampere, Finland. In the NGO forum that followed, he chaired a working group preparing for a 1995 "summit" on social development scheduled for Copenhagen.

Another of his abiding interests is in reform of the U.N. way of settling disputes between staff and management, which, "coming from a country —
Sweden — where rights of employees are closely safeguarded,” he finds unsatisfactory.

- Georges Esatoglu, formerly fearless editor of Dialogue, and friends, operated a food stand — “grandes spécialités orientales,” the programme said — at a kermesse for the benefit of the charity Clair-Bois, last September in neighbouring Versoix.

- Lindsay Moutia, formerly FIN, made the sports page of the Dauphiné Libéré last October proudly displaying a winner’s trophy. Carding the best net (handicapped) score, he triumphed in this category of the “Coupe du capitaine du seniors,” a golf tournament at Saint-Jean-de-Gonville.

- Rajindar Pal, formerly Chief VGB, and Deputy Director of India’s National Malaria Eradication Programme was interviewed recently by BBC. He assured listeners that the malaria outbreak in Rajasthan would abate soon, certainly with the onset of winter. It’s cause: a new irrigation canal, and the heavy monsoon season this year, which increased breeding places for the mosquito. (See also malaria item “In the House”)

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Former staff interested in brushing up, refreshing up, or continuing study in French or English (now that there’s more free time) may enroll in WHO language courses, thanks to an arrangement made by the Association.

Tuition is CHF 300 per term, which comprises about 40 hours of study. (The U.N. fee is about CHF 500.) There are two terms a year, with the next term beginning in September. Classes are held twice weekly, an hour and a half each session. There is a placement test to determine the correct level.

HELLO, SAINT ENDRÉOL

For lack of finances, Narbonne the proposed resort for internationals is dead, pronounced so by Manuela d’Arcy, formerly of the United Nations, and a spokeswoman for the project.

But there may be yet a place in Southern France, she says, where U.N. civil servants, former and serving, can be drawn to — to live or to let live among kindred folk who’ve shared service for the peoples of the world.

That is the idea behind a new project at Saint Endréol, located just a half hours drive from Cannes and St Tropez, which was presented recently in Geneva to a group of interested people (including former ILO Director General, Francis Blanchard) at the Hotel d’Allèves. Much has to be worked out, but one advantage of the site is already evident: its proximity to a golf course bordered by tall parasol pines bathed in the sunlight that only the people lucky enough to live far South enjoy.

As for accommodation, there are going to be houses and apartments for sale or rent, all built in the simple inimitable style of Provence that only gets nicer as it gets older.

How to ensure that there will be the right kind of physical, cultural and intellectual activity to make a stay in Saint Endreol stimulating as well as restful and lovely will depend on responses to a four-page questionnaire. That was distributed at the meeting to determine tastes and preference, as well the range of prices most suited to internationals.

More should be heard about this project in the coming months. But for further details now contact Le Club International, Saint Endréol, 8 rue Leroux 75116 Paris, tel 45 01 91 91; Fax 45 01 57 77.

—Nedd Willard
(formerly INF)

FORMER STAFF DEFENDS WHO

So incensed was John Bland, former editor, World Health by the story “Who Needs this Bunch of Wasters?” (Sunday Express, London, 25 September 1994) that he shot off a letter to the editor. Excerpts from his defense follow:

“WHO’s budget for 1994-95 is $1.8 billion, or £570 a year, far less than the figure quoted. The idea that salaries average $77,000 provokes a big laugh here in Geneva. A high-grade professional may earn about £39,000, and a director, £48,000, plus incentives similar to those offered by governments and private business to expatriate staff. If salaries take the lion’s share of the budget, this is because WHO’s stock-in-trade is brains; it is not running a hardware store.

“Your correspondent seems to think that smoking and traffic accidents are problems only for the industrialized world, but the smoking pandemic is already killing more people in the Third World than in the Western world; if he travelled further than, say, Essex, he would learn that the road toll is appalling and growing. Polio has already disappeared from the American continent, thanks in large part to WHO’s initiative, and will be eradicated from the planet by the Year 2000.
“A dose of reform is healthy for any bureaucracy and fair comment is welcome, but the rubbish peddled by your writer only shows that it is he who is the ‘waster’. Your readers deserve better.”

(Bruvo, John — Editor)

SERVING STAFF STILL ON TENTERHOOKS

On behalf of the Executive Heads of specialized agencies, the Director-General of ILO has advised France, through its U.N. Mission that it would be “premature” to now send a delegation to Geneva to discuss taxation of serving staff living in France.

After some 40 years of being exempt from income tax, serving staff of all nationalities residing in France would be required to pay them, under proposals put forward by Paris — over the opposition of mayors of French villages where internationals live. As all staff pay a “staff assessment,” this would mean a virtual double taxation. To avoid that, France has now proposed a “tax credit” equal to the amount deducted from gross salaries. In addition it has agreed not to apply the tax retroactively, which had been a main point of contention.

The response from the agencies is dependent on clarification from France on what has been described in a circular (94/90) dated October, as “a certain number of very important questions of principles” raised by the agencies, including WHO.

Staff serving with the U.N. itself, or with CERN, are not affected by the proposal as these organizations have agreements with France. Under the new proposal France would ratify the 1947 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the Specialized Agencies with “certain reservations,” permitting taxation of salaries.

A survey carried out by the ILO Staff Union in October showed the tax would drive the vast majority away from neighbouring France.

(see also page 3)

Health Insurance

SIGHT AND SOUND

The health insurance plan has been asked to reimburse 80 per cent of the costs of lenses, and to cover hearing aids also in the same way.

These changes would put WHO participants on par with those in the U.N. system, according to a resolution adopted last October at the staff’s Annual General Meeting. These items would then fall in the same category of reimbursement as other medical appliances.

The maximum amount now reimbursed for lenses plus frames, generally every two years, is $100. That sum, “in Geneva is often less than the cost of one lens,” the resolution said, while also calling for some reimbursement of the cost of frames. These proposals now go to the Surveillance Committee.

As presented by the 42nd Staff Committee, the resolution centered on glasses. But following a proposal from the floor by the Association’s Dr R. Pal, recently-elected chairman, it was amended to include hearing aids. Under rules, hearing aids are reimbursed, every five years, up to $500.

IN THE HOUSE

THREE TOP JOB HOLDERS:

AGES 62, 62, 63

• AFRO: Dr Ebrahim Malick Samba, 62, since 1980 Director of WHO’s Onchocerciasis Control Programme in West Africa, has been nominated Regional Director, AFRO.

He was born in the Gambia in 1932, and is a graduate of the University of Ghana and the National University of Ireland. He is married with three children.

• AMRO: Sir George Alleyne, 62, formerly Assistant Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau and a staff member since 1981, has been nominated Regional Director, AMRO.

He was born in St Philip, Barbados in 1932, and is a graduate of the University of the West Indies.

• EURO: Dr Jo Eirik Asvall, 63, has been nominated for a third term as Regional Director EURO.

He was born in Norway in 1931, and is a graduate of Oslo University and Johns Hopkins University. He was elected to his first term in 1985, and to a second term in 1990.

All nominations are subject to confirmation by WHO’s Executive Board when it meets in January 1995.

CVD’S : NEGLCTED IN ELDERLY

Epidemics of cardiovascular disease are forecast for most countries as the number of elderly increases. Claiming some 12 million lives a year, CVD already is the leading cause of death worldwide among the over-65 year-olds whose numbers are projected to double within the next 20 years.

Prevention and treatment of these illnesses
however remains a low priority almost everywhere. Little is known about risk factors — such as high blood pressure, elevated blood cholesterol levels, smoking, obesity, physical inactivity and diabetes — in this age group, or about the prospects for preventing them.

MALARIA: THE COLOMBIAN VACCINE

Two-year field trials recently concluded in Tanzania have shown that the Colombian "SPf66" vaccine is safe, induces antibodies and can reduce the risk of malaria by around 30 per cent in children, a WHO release (No. 81) says.

The vaccine is also under trial in The Gambia, and on the border of Thailand and Myanmar (Burma). The developers of the vaccine, Dr Manuel Patarroyo, and colleagues, have offered to donate licence rights of SPf66 to WHO.

SMALLPOX: BYE, BYE

The last stocks of smallpox virus held in the United States and Russia should be destroyed, according to a WHO Ad Hoc Committee on Orthopoxvirus Infections which recommended destruction following the World Health Assembly in May 1995.

The Committee also recommended that 500,000 doses of vaccine be stocked by WHO for emergencies and that the vaccine seed virus be kept in a WHO collaborating centre in Biltoven, The Netherlands.

The global eradication of smallpox was declared in May 1980; the last natural case of smallpox detected in Somalia in October 1977.

EVERY OTHER DAY, IT’S O.K.

"There is no minimum threshold below which alcohol can be consumed without any risk,” Hans Emblad, Director of WHO’s Programme on Substance Abuse, is quoted as saying in a press release (WHO/84).

In a specific reference to the role of alcohol in reducing the risk of cardiovascular diseases, “scientific studies show that only one drink every other day is liable to reduce the risk,” the release states, “while this risk certainly increases above two drinks per day.”

To reduce the risk of CVD it’s better to “avoid smoking, engage in physical activity, eat less fats... This concept of moderate drinking as healthy is not the result of rigorous scientific research, but is to a large extent inspired by commercial purposes,” the release says.

(Another view is found in Technical Report Series No. 841: “It is probably better to conclude that moderate consumption of alcohol (up to 30g of ethanol daily) does no harm to the cardiovascular system than to emphasize its protective effect.”
—Editor)

LETTERS

(Unless stated to the contrary by correspondents, letters received are routinely considered, and edited, for publication to encourage an exchange of views among colleagues. — Editor)

“THE WORTH OF YEARS”

Re: Anger at 85 (News, 17 Spring 1994)

I fully sympathize with Tove Engman. Like her, I too had to visit Geneva to seek clarifications about the increases in premiums when my letter from California went unanswered back in 1990. In comparing our premiums to those of the profit-making insurance companies, our Staff Health Insurance office, in its letter of 21 July 1994, sadly ignores, or worse still, devalues the worth of our years of service to WHO.

Professional staff, who must have solid experience before joining, can rarely accumulate 30 years of contribution. In my case, after nearly 23 years, the premium (for my wife and myself) jumped from $607.35 in 1988 to $1870.08 in 1994.

—Mahmood Suleiman
Stamford, California
(formerly EHE)
“COMPLETE RUBBISH”

Re: The Taxing Problem of Pension (News, 18, Summer 1994)

You write: “The Republic and Canton of Geneva and the United States exempt that part of pension financed by the pensioner — provided there is no lump sum settlement.”

I don’t know who told you this, or whether it is true of the United States, but as far as Geneva is concerned it is — excuse me! — complete rubbish. U.N. pensions here are treated in the same way as those from any other source, but in practice the position is similar to that in the UK.

If (as in the U.N. system) you have contributed more than 20 per cent but less than 100 per cent of the cost of your pension, you can, whether or not you have taken a lump sum, deduct for tax purposes 10 per cent from the annual amount you receive from the pension fund. (Investment income from a lump sum or other capital is taxable without deduction.)

Thus, if in a given year your pension amounts to 60,000 CHF and your interest or dividends from investments to 30,000 CHF, you will be taxed (the following year) on 84,000 CHF (60,000 less 6000 = 54,000 for the pension, plus 30,000).

This is by no means the whole story, because there is federal as well as cantonal and communal tax to be paid, not to mention the tax levied on your capital itself (which includes the notional value of any house or flat you may own) as well as on the income from it. Personally, I get an expert to fill in my tax forms for me and I consider it well worth what he charges.

—John Fraser
Versoix
(formerly TRA)

(In short, there’s a 10 per cent deduction on pensions. On that basis alone, Geneva may be more attractive than neighbouring France for the pensioner. The fees of an expert vary, naturally enough, but for a fairly straightforward tax return, about CHF 500 has been suggested. Thus even out of “rubbish,” comes information and knowledge. Any further insights on the taxing problem welcome. —Editor)

THE WTO-SWISS DEAL

(The following letter dated 9 September 1994, was sent to Mr J.P. Lapalme, chairman of the GATT Staff Association, and copied to staff and former staff associations in Geneva. As the News went to print, there was no known reply. —Editor.)

Like many other international civil servants in Geneva, I followed with a great deal of interest the events that resulted in the decision of the World Trade Organization, GATT’s successor, to establish itself in Geneva (from January 1995, thereby declining an offer from Bonn).

Our information, of course, comes from press reports of the package of benefits offered by Swiss officials as incentive for you to remain here. What emerges strongly and clearly is that you at WTO, and by extension, we, other internationals, are welcome.

If what has been reported is accurate, there are implications in your arrangements for other agencies in Geneva. I refer in particular to the agreement that spouses may seek employment on the local market, and that pensions might be exempt from income tax, as with Vienna, another city that hosts a multitude of international agencies. But there may be other benefits as well not known to us.

Please be kind enough to send us whatever there is in writing about the WTO-Swiss agreement, notably those provisions affecting staff. This may be an opportune moment to review privileges and immunities as they pertain to international civil servants in Switzerland.

—Jan Stjernsward, M.D.
Chairman, WHO 42nd Staff Committee

NO LONGER ALIVE

Re: Still Alive, Village Narbonne (News, 18, Summer 1994)

I am very much interested in the Village Narbonne project and eventually would like, together with my wife, to install ourselves permanently at that place. Could you provide me with detailed information, or transmit this letter to a person who could do so.

I have served WHO for 18 years at various duty stations.

—Imrich Geizer, M.D.
Prague

(The organizers have announced the demise of Narbonne, along with the birth of Saint Endreol, as will be seen on page 6. Your letter has been passed on to the responsible official for the new enterprise. —Editor)

NOBELIST

Dr Niels Jerne, who died in September at the age of 83, joined WHO in 1956 as head of the biological standardization unit. Becoming a lecturer in
Dr Ebrahim Samba (director of WHO's Onchocerciasis Control Programme in West Africa) recognizes the contribution of private industry to the success of WHO's programme, especially Merck & Co., for “giving us the drug ivermectin free;” Abbott Laboratories for “selling Bacillus thuringiensis at a reduced price;” Ciba Geigy, Wellcome, Takeda, Bayer, Janssen “and many more (that) have contributed”.

("Excerpted from Health Horizons, Autumn '94")

MOST FORTUNATE CHAP

China's paramount leader and most revered living Communist, Deng Xiaoping, has been awarded a special prize for being a "Most Fortunate Old Person," a press report said. Deng, who turned 90 on 20 Aug 1994 is not only “a man of noble character and high prestige, he is the most beloved among China's elderly people,” according to the China Business Times.

("Excerpted from the Int'l Herald Tribune, 8-9 Oct '94")

REMEMBERING TEDDIE POULTON

Teddie Poulton, DM, MRCP, DCh, DPH worked for WHO for 18 years: first in Egypt, from where he was evacuated during the Suez crisis, and then in Nigeria, Zaire (during the Congo war and famine), Uganda, and Sierra Leone. He was happiest when teaching hygiene and prophylactic medicine in African villages and rural clinics. He spent his spare time building up one of the world's finest private collections of African butterflies and teaching his grey parrot to speak English.

Retiring in 1972, he recycled himself as a general practitioner and spent the next 21 years doing locums across the area between Worthing and Portsmouth. An enthusiastic life member of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, he danced at least twice each week keeping himself fit.

He was born 20 April 1913 and was educated in Rugby and Balliol College, Oxford and Guy's Hospital (BM, BCh 1938). During the war he served in the Indian Army Medical Service, in the Persian Gulf, and Italy. At the end of the war he married Delicia Iremonger, to whom he had been engaged for almost five years. He died of a myocardial infarct and is survived by his wife, five children, and six grandchildren.

—E.C. Poulton

("Excerpted from British Medical Journal")

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