The rise and fall of health systems research at WHO: Lessons from History

05 October - 2006 | Geneva - This week's Global Health Histories lunchtime seminar is the latest in a series featuring eminent health historians from around the world, including from France, Peru and Sweden. Subjects so far have been as diverse as cholera epidemics in Egypt, TB campaigns in India, and life expectancy in Russia. The topic this week is closer to home: the rise and fall of health systems research in the 1970s, as it played out in WHO HQ. The presenter is Dr Socrates Litsios, a former senior scientist at WHO, now retired, who is writing an official history of WHO's third decade (1968-1977).

Health systems research (HSR) became a central activity at WHO under the then Director-General Marcolino Candau, around 1967. He believed in HQ being the centre of WHO's research activities. However, this view was not shared by his successor, Haldan Mahler. He saw research as essentially a national affair coordinated by Regional Offices. By the time Dr Mahler took over in 1973, HSR had been marginalized, to the dismay of many Member States.

What led to this profound change in policy, and what were its consequences? Where does health systems research stand today? The answers will be provided at a lunchtime seminar in Salle D on Friday, October 6. The presenter is Dr Socrates Litsios, who was working in the relevant departments under both Dr Candau and Dr Mahler. He is now writing the official history of WHO's third decade (1968-1977) as part of the Global Health Histories initiative established by the Department of Knowledge Management and Sharing.

"There is no doubt that for many years, health systems research was a neglected area within WHO," Dr Litsios said. "The reasons are complex but it is only through understanding the history of the Organization that we can learn lessons and see clearly the way forward today."

Dr Tikki Pang, Director of Research Policy and Cooperation, said: "It's now widely recognized that health systems research is absolutely critical for improving health care delivery. Unfortunately that wasn't the case for a long time.

"It started to change with the arrival of Dr Brundtland as Director-General and gathered momentum under Dr Lee. The Mexico Ministerial Summit on Health Research in 2004 really was the breakthrough and now the subject has its highest visibility for several decades."
Friday's seminar is the latest in a series organized within the Global Health Histories initiative. Dr Litsios's official history is aimed for publication in 2008, which marks the 60th anniversary of WHO. Several other projects are also underway, with similar target dates, including a major book on the role of WHO in the history of global health, which will be written by three eminent international health historians.

There will also be a package of oral histories of many leading figures in WHO and in global health generally in recent decades, and a collection of "public health classics" - landmark papers published in the medical and scientific literature and reprinted with modern commentaries in the Bulletin of the World Health Organization.

GHH has established an international network of historians and developed relationships with the History of Medicine Division of the National Library of Medicine and the Rockefeller Archives Centre, in the USA, the Wellcome Centre for the History of Medicine and the Centre for History in Public Health in London, and the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Geneva, among others. The core editorial team at HQ is led by Dr Ariel Pablos-Mendez. The activities, including the seminars, are coordinated by Thomson Prentice, and the oral histories work is organized by former WHO librarian Carole Modis, assisted by several former staff members. The Regional Offices are also engaged in contributing historical materials.