Health systems research (HSR) became a central activity at WHO under the then Director-General Marcolino Candau, who situated it within a new division, Research in Epidemiology and Communications Science (RECS), set up in 1967. Dr Candau believed in HQ being the centre of WHO's research activities.

However, this view was not shared by his successor, Halfdan Mahler, who regarded research as a national affair with WHO collaboration essentially coordinated by the Regional Offices. By the time Dr Mahler took over in 1973, HSR had been marginalized, to the dismay of many Member States. The RECS division was in effect dismantled and merged with another, Strengthening of Health Services (SHS).

What led to this profound change in policy? Dr Socrates Litsios, who was Chief of Operational Research in RECS, and later Chief of Primary Health Care in SHS, is currently writing the official history of WHO's third decade (1968-1977) as part of the Global Health Histories initiative. In charting the rise and fall of health systems research in the 1970s he will point to the lessons from this episode that might be of use today.

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