

## Uauy on Horwitz

### Dr. Abraham Horwitz ( 1910-2000)

Dr. Abraham Horwitz developed 3 careers over the course of his life, in all he excelled. A national career characterized by his commitment to combating infectious disease and promoting public health, specializing in these fields in Chile after completing his MD degree at the University of Chile in 1936. During this period he faced the meningococcal meningitis epidemic which affected Chile in 1941, no antibiotics were available and sulfa drugs were used as the only preventive and curative strategy. The Chilean medical team headed by Dr. Horwitz was the first to use sulfadiazine in the treatment of this disease almost invariably fatal, the case fatality after sulfadiazine was introduced dropped to 7%, this was spectacular at the time. His example of dedicated work served as a model shaping future generations of physicians motivated by public service.

Professor Lucio Cordova in presenting young Horwitz as a candidate for Extraordinary Professorship in June of 1942 summarized his merits as follows:...*“he cultivates the science of Bacteriology and Immunology with enthusiasm and excellence, he walks without stumbling in the field of investigation, for him problems in the laboratory are no secret..... over recent years he has applied his vivid intelligence to penetrate and successfully unravel clinical problems. In addition to this wealth of knowledge, Dr.Horwitz is a good communicator, a master at elucidating the most confusing problems, secure in reasoning and mature in judgment, these attributes will make him a Professor that will be listened to and followed by his students with constant interest”.*

After this period in the front line of action, he completed his postgraduate training with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, in the USA receiving his MPH at John Hopkins University in 1944. He returned to Chile where he was named Director of the School of Public Health where he continued his work as a researcher, teacher and in public service. This period was characterized nationally by his interest in the organization of health care in Chile and regionally by his work on the eradication of small pox linked to PAHO. This period culminated in 1953 when he was named technical Associate Director of the newly

established National Health Service and was completed in 1958 when he was elected by the governments of the region to head PAHO. At this early stage Horwitz was known to practice what he preached, demonstrating his commitment with action. In a world that questions the validity of public service and social action in favor of those in greatest need without distinction of socioeconomic level, recognizing and learning from Horwitz serves to reaffirm those principles.

During his 16 years (58-74) as head of PAHO, he demonstrated energy, great capacity to organize and mobilize a complex institution gaining support for health and development projects. No PAHO Director, before or after Horwitz, has been reelected 4 times. Perhaps his greatest achievement was improving the water supply and sanitation in the region. The goal of the Ten-year Health Plan of the Americas, to provide potable water to 70 % of the urban population, was met in 1974. PAHO with the support of the World Bank and governments of the region lead the way and was responsible for investing over 6 billion dollars (1977) to this effect. PAHO's priorities during this time included health infrastructure programs, medical education, animal health and control of parasitic disease and new technologies in health. Thanks to these activities smallpox was eradicated from the region in 1971. The message given by Dr. Horwitz to the countries of the region and to donors was very clear *"Health has an intrinsic value for all human beings. i.e. it is an end in itself, but it is also an essential means for human and economic development"*.

After completing his fourth term Dr. Horwitz was named Emeritus Director of PAHO and PAHEF. The Foundation established the prize which bears his name recognizing his immense contribution to the improvement of health in the Americas. Between 1975 and 1978 he set the basis for his third career. He was invited to become Professor of International Nutrition by Columbia University but preferred to work as a Scholar in Residence at the Fogarty International Center for Advanced Study in Health Sciences of the NIH. He decided to concentrate his efforts in the analysis of the malnutrition problem in the Americas initiating his third career. He was quickly recognized by his contributions and was named Chairman of the International Program in Nutrition of the Food and Nutrition Board of the USA National Research Council of the US National Academy of Science in 1978. From

1982 to 1985 he chaired the Advisory Group on Nutrition (AGN) of the UN Subcommittee on Nutrition SCN created in 1977 after the First World Food Conference. The SCN harmonizes the activities of the UN system in food and nutrition. In 1986 he was elected to chair the SCN and continued in this position for 10 years. Upon his retirement in 1995 the SCN established the Horwitz Lecture to be given annually by a young researcher who has made a major contribution in solving global nutrition and food problems. This as a testimony of the significant contribution of Dr. Horwitz to International Nutrition. His work presiding the SCN included responsibility for publishing the World Nutrition Report, with special attention to the situation of refugees, definition of micronutrient deficiency Iodine, Iron and Vitamin A as global problems, publication of the SCN newsletter, and proposing the International Conference in Nutrition organized by FAO/WHO in 1991 with the imperative to act to significantly reduce hunger and malnutrition before the end of the century. His vision on the importance to health and nutrition for human and social development can be summarized as follows in his own words. *"Health and Nutrition should be placed at the center of human and social development in all countries, but particularly in those where the malnutrition-infection complex is the major cause of death and disease of children under five and of mothers."* As a departing advice to the SCN assembled to bid him good bye upon terminating his term as chair he left in these few words the essence of his legacy *"Keep the faith...you are committed to a most noble cause, the well being of people whom you do not know but whose needs you feel intensely. Redouble your efforts in whatever you do in nutrition while being bold and imaginative."* Horwitz remains a source of inspiration to all of us who were privileged by his company and should continue to inspire generations to come. We must preserve and honor his legacy.