On April 7, 2008, World Health Day, the World Health Organization (WHO) will mark its 60th anniversary. What better occasion to celebrate WHO’s major contributions to international and global health? Several items in this issue relate to this celebratory theme. Fitzgerald, for example, indirectly underscores WHO’s critical role in monitoring international weapons conventions in his gripping essay on the history of chemical warfare. Bu et al.’s Voices From the Past offering focuses on a selection from John B. Grant’s presentation to a 1951 WHO staff meeting, which provides important historical insights into the organization’s longstanding interest in the most effective models for the organization of health services.

A more direct celebration of WHO is Fee et al.’s “birthday card” in the form of an extended Images of Health essay. Here we find visual evidence and supporting text for some of WHO’s most notable achievements: the creation of a global network for the facilitated communication of epidemiological information, the impressive campaign to reduce malaria worldwide, the successful promotion of both comprehensive and selective primary health care, the mobilization of extensive immunization programs, the control of onchocerciasis (“river blindness”) and other tropical diseases, and the leadership in recent decades of efforts in global public health. These achievements over the course of its first 60 years have established WHO’s unquestioned importance as the preeminent international health agency and augur well for the future.

There is, however, still more about WHO that we should celebrate on this occasion. These are its lofty ideals captured in the language of the preamble to its constitution, now 60 years old, and of the Alma Ata Declaration, now 30 years old. The former declared that “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being,” and the latter stated that “economic and social development is of basic importance to the fullest attainment of health for all and to the reduction of the gap between the health status of the developing and developed countries.” These stirring words have captured the attention of people all over the world and have inspired several generations of health workers. They helped forge an image of WHO as an agency aspiring to the highest idealism, well above the budget-constrained pragmatism and realpolitik that often, of necessity, mark its daily operations. Perhaps no one captured the ideals of WHO better than did Frank G. Boudreau in a December 1951 Journal essay (1951:41:1477–1482):

Two-thirds of the world’s population is crying for relief from disease, hunger, premature death, and poverty but does not know where to turn for relief. WHO, above all other international agencies, is fitted to show the way, for its jurisdiction is in one of the few areas where men of all races and creeds can work easily together. . . . Joining hands with our colleagues in other countries, we must take our people up to the mountaintop where they can see the promised land of good health, peace, and freedom stretching before them.

Now, we too need to remember not only what WHO has done but also what it has inspired. If its ideals are taken as seriously as they should be, WHO will contribute not only to achieving better health for all but also to creating a better world in which all can live.

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