

medical sciences

Gathered at the meeting of the World Medical Assembly in Sydney, Australia

LAWSUITS

A problem worldwide

The alarming increase in court actions against doctors is damaging the prestige of the medical profession, the secretary of the Belgian Medical Association, Dr. A. Wynen, told the assembly.

"A doctor may get to the point where he has a subconscious fear of operating, a subconscious fear of making a mistake," he said.

The president of the American Medical Association, Dr. D. L. Wilbur, said a doctor in the U.S. could expect to be sued at least once during his working lifetime.

"There are Americans who make a living from such lawsuits," he said. Most American doctors are insured against malpractice lawsuits, he said. He advised doctors to fight the suits.

"Litigation forced to the end usually discourages the person suing and discourages others," Dr. Wilbur said. "If you compromise and settle out of court, you set a pattern for others to follow, and you also have to pay the costs."

FAMILY PLANNING

A strong nondecision

The WMA has laid down no hard and fast recommendations on the controversial subject of contraception and therapeutic abortion. Dr. S. S. Gilder of Great Britain, a member of the association's medical ethics committee, said the international body decided last year only in principle to supply family planning information.

"Having agreed that it was right and proper that couples should plan their families, we left it to the couples themselves to decide just how this should be done," he said. "We do not believe this should be laid down as a directive in government policy."

Therapeutic abortion is still under consideration. The WMA has circulated to member countries criteria for therapeutic abortion backed by the American Medical Association. The countries are being asked to debate the subject, and, presumably, a recommendation will be made sometime in the future.

SALARIES, TRANSPLANTS

The view from Moscow

Soviet citizens respect doctors but give them no special social status or privileges, says the secretary of the 5-million strong, U.S.S.R. Medical Workers Union. Dr. Boris Zenisov says his union includes all medical workers from ambulance drivers to surgeons and medical specialists. Russia's 500,000 doctors, more than half of them women, are paid fixed salaries ranging from 120 to 300 rubles a month. (A ruble is worth about \$1.)

Dr. Zenisov and a Soviet heart specialist, Dr. Igor Shkhvatsabaya, attended the World Medical Assembly as observers; they are not members of the world body. They are the first Russians doctors to attend a WMA meeting.

On heart transplants, Dr. Zenisov says Russia has the technical knowledge to perform them but has delayed them because there was inadequate assurance of success.

His companion, Dr. Shkhvatsabaya, of the U.S.S.R. Institute of Cardiology, described heart transplants as technically easy. He said Russian doctors had done the operation on animals, but there were still difficulties. "There is still a very big problem created by the patient's rejection of the foreign organ," he said.

In contrast to the U.S.S.R.'s refusal to transplant a heart, a Czechoslovakian team of surgeons at Bratislava University implanted the heart of a man in his 40's into the chest of a woman in her 50's on July 9. Mrs. Ellen Horvathova died five hours after the operation, performed at Partyzanska Ulice Hospital in Bratislava. Prof. Karol Siska headed the team, which included Dr. Ladislav Kuzela, one of the country's best-known heart surgeons.

SURGERY

Gearing up to transplants

No charge will be made to patients for any heart transplant operations in Australia for some time, according to Dr. A. J. Forbes, Australian health minister. Such operations, at least for the next few years, will be attempted only at major metropolitan hospitals which have affiliations with university faculties.

It was reported that the University of Sydney's transplant team plans to perform its first human heart transplant at the end of this year. It expects eventually to transplant possibly up to five human hearts a year.

The university group is believed to be satisfied with the results of heart transplant techniques it has developed with dogs. Each week for the past two years, the group has transplanted vital organs from dogs to other dogs.

The chief cardiac surgeon, a heart physician, and an anesthetist of the Sydney University group will leave Australia next month to study latest transplant results in the U.S. and South Africa.

IN ZAMBIA

Witchdoctors blamed for blindness

Doctors in Zambia have to fight three M's—malnutrition, measles and muti (witchdoctors' medicine), says Dr. G. J. Goosen, the Zambian delegate to the World Medical Assembly. The primitive beliefs of the Zambian people cause widescale blindness and suffering.

Measles and vitamin-A deficiency cause eye disease in many of Zambia's 4.5 million people, and the popular cure for this is to pour burning mixtures of acid or alkali into the eye of the sufferer, the doctor said.

"In the Luapula Valley, 90 miles long by 10 miles wide, with a population of 100,000, there are 834 blind people, mostly children. This is one of the highest incidences of blindness in the world."

As an obstetrician, Dr. Goosen has delivered 25,000 babies in Zambia. "But we face a very high infant mortality—120 per 1,000 births," he said.

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