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SALUTE TO PAHO ON ITS 90TH ANNIVERSARY

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It is for me a personal pleasure to salute the Pan American Health Organization on its 90th Birthday. For an individual, for many organizations, 90 years is commonly associated with growing senescence or, at the very least, advanced arteriosclerosis. But, in my contacts with PAHO over the past 35 years, and especially during the past decade, I perceive now not an arteriosclerotic organization but one now brimming with energy, growing in vitality, in stature, in leadership in health throughout the hemisphere and, indeed, the world. It is a privilege to claim association with PAHO.

Illustrative of its vital global role has been PAHO's leadership and creativity in three of the world's major health initiatives, all of which I know well -- smallpox eradication, polio eradication and the expanded program of immunization. When we began the smallpox eradication program 25 years ago, many were openly skeptical that smallpox -- or for that matter any disease -- could actually be eradicated. Our conceptual strategy which would highlight surveillance and containment was just that -- conceptual. It required the acid test of field experience.

We turned first to PAHO and to Dr. Abraham Horowitz, then the Director, with two objectives in mind. One, to test the critical strategy and, two, to interrupt transmission if possible at an early date -- an accomplishment which would serve, as nothing else could, to give confidence and courage to other nations of the world.

Just over 4 years later -- in April 1971 -- the last case of smallpox was detected in the whole of the Western Hemisphere. This proved, indeed, to be the critical signal to the rest of the world that eradication was feasible. It served to stimulate lagging national programs across the globe. Many of the global program's surveillance and containment mechanisms were created and honed in the Americas. Most important of all, the hemisphere provided to the rest of the world many of the key leaders who brought to other programs a "can do" attitude. Key leaders came from Brazil, Mexico, Belize, Argentina, Canada and the United States.

In December 1969, even before smallpox eradication was completed, a global conference on immunization was held -- where else but here at PAHO. The question -- if we are so successful in giving smallpox vaccine, why not other life-saving vaccines. A blueprint was developed and adopted for a global campaign to vaccinate children throughout the world with DPT, polio, measles and BCG. This scheme was eventually adopted by WHO and this became the foundation and centerpiece of the Child Survival Program. As of 1990, a landmark was celebrated -- vaccination of 80% of the world's children with the six antigens. It is now hailed as the most extensive program in prevention ever conducted -- and, indeed, the most extensive social service program ever conceived.

With global immunization progressing well, most notably in the Americas, Dr. Macedo convened a group of experts in 1985 and asked whether polio might now be considered for hemisphere-wide eradication. And so began polio eradication in the Americas. As I am sure you know, the last known case of poliomyelitis in the whole of the Western Hemisphere occurred just 15 months ago -- an unprecedented achievement. Once more, following the PAHO lead, a global program was decided upon in 1988 and that is now in progress.

But there is more. The first comprehensive surveillance program -- initially for polio and now for measles and tetanus -- was perfected here; an international diagnostic laboratory network was established; programs to eventually assure vaccine independence are well advanced in all countries; vaccine production initiatives have begun; and new techniques -- called National Vaccination Days -- have been shown to be not only effective but crucial to the achievement of polio eradication.

I would note parenthetically that virtually every one of these highly successful initiatives were originally discussed or proclaimed to be unrealistic by many, including WHO colleagues across the Atlantic. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, PAHO has been, and is being, flattered as no other organization. And still, there remain other PAHO initiatives, now developing, which are presently viewed as unrealistic or unachievable.

But the future promises more. In my own stints of service on the Technical Advisory Group for Immunization, I have been privileged to meet with great numbers of PAHO and national staff who are actually responsible for directing the programs. Never have I met so many, young, energetic, innovative and determined young people. They promise the future. And I would venture to say that with PAHO leadership, more will be achieved in health within the coming decade than has been achieved over the past 90 years.

It is a privilege to salute PAHO, its leadership and its member states on an historic birthday.