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Opening address

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by Sven Hernberg, MD, Chairman of the Scientific Committee on Epidemiology in Occupational Health

Epidemiology has become important as a foundation for both occupational health practice and the scientific study of the causal connection between occupational exposures and manifestations of ill health. Descriptive epidemiology can be used for "community diagnosis" of workplaces, for risk identification, for surveillance of trends of health problems, for the determination of normal values, and for the generation of hypotheses for the study of cause-effect relationships. Etiologic epidemiology is predominantly used in the search for causal connection between occupational exposures and various adverse health effects. Hence, it can be used to determine occupational etiologic or preventive factors for diseases with multiple etiology, to complete the clinical picture, and, as a second-order problem, to establish exposure-effect and exposure-response relationships. Interventive epidemiology, which bears some resemblance to experimental research, can be used to support cause-effect inferences and to evaluate health care practice. This wide area of application has made epidemiologic research attractive to many students of occupational health, and the impact of this research can already be seen in a variety of theoretical and practical matters. However, enthusiasm for epidemiology should never obscure the fact that this science is but one of the approaches used for solving scientific problems or for the practice of occupational health. Epidemiology should always be in close interaction with experimental research, clinical trials, and other methods for increasing knowledge and improving the quality of practice. True insight in epidemiology not only requires knowledge of its possibilities but also a

thorough understanding of its limitations and shortcomings.

The Permanent Commission and International Association on Occupational Health has fostered research in occupational health from the beginning of this century. During the last few decades it has become apparent that the role of epidemiology in this task has increased in importance. In order to improve the possibilities of epidemiology in occupational health, to increase its importance, and to provide a formal forum for epidemiologists engaged in occupational health problems, the President of the Permanent Commission, Prof EC Vigliani appointed a Scientific Committee for Epidemiology in Occupational Health last year and asked me to arrange its first scientific conference. You are all important contributors to the success of this symposium.

More than a hundred participants have considered it worthwhile to attend and about 50 papers are to be presented. Considering the short notice and the fact that the XXth International Congress on Occupational Health takes place later this year in Cairo, these figures clearly indicate the need for this kind of symposia. A look at the program also reveals that a broad range of subjects will be treated, including occupational cancer, malformations, lung diseases, back problems, and neurotoxicity. Even more important, almost 20 papers address methodological aspects, relevant to the specific problems of occupational health. Finding a proper forum for such presentations has not been easy thus far. It is to be hoped that regular meeting activities of this new scientific committee will help promote research in respect to both subject matter and methodology.