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## MEDICAL CARE IN MEXICO

A Letter from James G. Maddox

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PHILLIPS TALBOT  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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The resident of Mexico City who has the money with which to pay, and ordinary knowledge about how to select a doctor and a hospital, can obtain medical care equal to that available in most cities of the United States. This, however, is not generally true of other cities of Mexico, and in isolated rural areas a sick person may have to rely on a doctor who has written his own medical degree and gone into practice because it was a profitable profession. Those who are squeamish about using this type of practitioner can always go to the local pharmacist, or even to a witch doctor. Thus the range of choice is wide - from a few topnotch specialists, several of whom are as good as can be found in any of the large cities of the United States, to the illiterate witch doctors of isolated rural villages. Between these two extremes lies the area of practice in which most Mexicans receive their medical care, but it is probable that at least one-half of the people rarely go to a doctor who has graduated from a medical school.

### THE MEDICAL STAFF

Mexico, a country of about 30 million people, has approximately 15,000 doctors with medical degrees. Thus, there is approximately one trained doctor for each 2,000 inhabitants in the country. In the United States, the ratio is about one trained doctor for each 777 inhabitants. In 1954, the latest year for which I have been able to obtain statistics, there were 573 hospitals in Mexico with a total of 24,246 beds. Thus there was less than one hospital bed per 1,000 inhabitants. The

comparable figure for the United States is approximately 10 beds per 1,000 people.

Country-wide figures, however, obscure the fact that a large proportion of the nation's medical manpower is concentrated in Mexico City. About 7,000 of the 15,000 physicians, for example, are practicing in the Federal District - - Mexico City and a few surrounding villages. Likewise, 196 of the hospitals and two-thirds of all hospital beds are in this metropolitan area. Although there is less than one hospital bed per 1,000 inhabitants for the country as a whole, in Mexico City the ratio is about 2.9 beds per 1,000 people. Moreover, at least half of the 8,000 trained doctors who practice outside of the Federal District are in the capital cities of the 29 states, leaving only about 4,000 trained physicians to serve the rest of the country.

Mexico has 15 medical schools, of which all but one offer a six-year course of training to students who have finished the regular eleven years of primary and secondary schooling. Most of these schools require either one or two years of internship after the six-year course of study before they grant the student a degree, and all except one require their students to practice in rural villages during their sixth year of school work. There are many differences of opinion about the quality of training given by these schools, but an objective-minded doctor in the Ministry of Public Health, who has studied both in Mexico and in one of the best medical schools in the United States, says that the Government school in Guadalajara, the Army school, and the Polytechnical school, both in Mexico City, compare favorably with medical schools in the United States. He rates four other Mexican medical schools - that of the National University, and the schools at Monterrey, Vera Cruz and San Luis Potosi - as being almost as good as the top three. The Army medical school is apparently a top-notch institution. In trying to get some idea of the quality of doctors available in Mexico, we must remember that a considerable number, probably about ten per cent

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of the total, have taken postgraduate work abroad. Most of these have gone to the United States, and some of them have studied three or four years in the better U. S. Medical centers.

There are 63 nursing schools in Mexico, of which 48 are actively operating. They offer a three-year course of training, which is generally heavily academic but short on practice. The present law requires that girls must have finished nine years of primary and secondary schooling before being admitted to a school of nursing. This, however, is a relatively new law, and is not being enforced. Apparently 85 to 90 per cent of the girls who enter nursing schools have had only six years of primary schooling. Nobody knows how many trained nurses there are in Mexico, but the best estimates put the number at around 10,000. The official registry maintained by the Ministry of Health shows that there are 3,250 but this number is known to be far too low. Most of the nursing care - perhaps as much as 90 per cent - is given by nurses' aides, the majority of whom have had no special training for their jobs. In general, therefore, nursing care falls far below the standards maintained in the United States.

Insofar as most Mexicans are concerned, pharmacists and their assistants are more important in the treatment of ailments than are doctors or nurses. The man in the corner drug store, and his white-coated assistant, who give injections, usually do a land-office business. They are the people who take care of the ordinary aches and pains, as well as some of the serious ailments of the working-class population. In rural villages, the pharmacist is the real competitor of the traditional practico and witch doctor. Drugs and medicines of all kinds are plentiful, and most of the large pharmaceutical firms in the United States have either branch factories or large distribution facilities in Mexico. Prices are about the same as they are in the United States, although some of the antibiotics are noticeably more expensive. Prescriptions from physicians are rarely required by pharmacists. If you know the name of the medicine and have the money, you can buy it. If you don't know what you want, you can describe your difficulty to the pharmacist and he will suggest a medicine "which has helped many people who seem to have had the same trouble."

#### A GLANCE AT THE BEST

Although the average level of medical care in Mexico is low as compared to that in the United States, it is nevertheless true that in Mexico City there are some outstandingly good doctors and a few well-operated hospitals. Among the latter, the three that are best known are The American British Cowdray Hospital, The Childrens Hospital and The Heart Institute. However, I understand that the French Hospital, the Spanish Hospital, and the Army Hospital also are good. There are perhaps a half-dozen good hospitals in cities outside the Federal District, two or three of which are operated by medical missionaries from the United States. North Americans residing in Mexico City are most likely to use The American British Cowdray Hospital, commonly

called "The ABC Hospital" but some of them may send their youngsters to The Childrens Hospital (El Hospital Infantil). In visits to these institutions I was favorably impressed.

The ABC Hospital resulted from a consolidation of two private institutions, American and British, about 15 years ago. It has a twelve-man Board of Governors, six of whom are American and six British. A lay administrator is the responsible manager and a qualified physician is medical director. It is the hospital used by many well-to-do Mexicans as well as by members of the American and British colonies. It has 89 beds, four operating rooms, two delivery rooms for obstetrical cases, X-ray and laboratory facilities, and special departments for physiotherapy, occupational therapy, orthopedic appliances and pathology. All nurses have finished at least a three-year course of basic training, and the hospital employs a registered dietician. There are three resident physicians employed by the hospital on a full-time basis. They function about as interns do in the United States. They are not allowed to admit or to treat patients except on the instructions of one of the staff physicians. The staff is composed of 115 physicians who are in private practice in the city. The Board of Governors, with the advice of the medical director, selects the staff physicians, and each is reappointed each year. This technique is used to prevent staff members from developing a vested interest in the hospital and feeling that they can remain on the staff regardless of the quality of service they render. Many of the staff members have had postgraduate training in the United States.

The charges at ABC Hospital are as follows: A large private room with bath is 160 pesos (U.S. \$12.80) per day; an ordinary private room with connecting bath shared by the occupant of the adjoining room is 130 pesos (U.S. \$10.40) per day; a small private room of the same type is 100 pesos (U.S. \$8.00) per day, and service in a ward of two to four persons costs 75 pesos (U.S. \$6.00) per day. As in most hospitals in the United States, additional charges are made for the use of the operating room, X rays, laboratory analyses, sutures, bandages and medicines. The charges for the operating and delivery rooms are calculated at the rate of 150 pesos (U.S. \$12.00) per hour. Attending physicians and anesthetists are, of course, viewed as independent contractors, and they submit their bills separately. The administrator of the hospital told me that the hospital bill for a maternity case without complications, usually ranges from 1,200 to 1,500 pesos (U.S. \$96 to \$120). For a normal appendectomy, without complications, the hospital bill is likely to run 1,800 to 2,000 pesos (U.S. \$144 to \$160). The charges of the anesthetist and physician are in addition to these hospital charges. They vary greatly among different doctors and are often related to the social and economic status of the family being attended. However, in both of these types of cases a fee of 1,500 to 2,000 pesos (U.S. \$120 to \$160) would be more or less typical for the kind of people who use the ABC Hospital.

The Childrens Hospital is a renowned institution for

the study and treatment of children's diseases and infirmities. It is one of those rare organizations in which treatment, surgery, nursing care and research have reached a level of quality that commands the respect of medical experts from all countries. Its organization, cleanliness and employee morale are strikingly superior to that prevailing in most Mexican hospitals. It has 564 beds, four operating rooms, 254 nurses, 280 nurses' aides, 36 interns and 20 residents, besides a large group of staff physicians and research specialists. In total, there is a ratio of 3.3 employees per patient. It received support from the government as well as from many private donors, including business firms and fraternal organizations among the American community. It receives patients from all over Mexico and its policy requires that each family pay according to its means. In order to determine the ability to pay, there is a large staff of social workers to make investigations of each family's economic status. The charge for a North American family, if a child were put in who would probably want a private room, would ordinarily be from 100 to 150 pesos (U.S. \$8 to \$12) per day.

*James L. Madley*