SYPHILIS: A PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM

By Dr. Thomas Parran

Surgeon General, U. S. Public Health Service

From the papers delivered here this afternoon and in the days before, one can draw a large measure of satisfaction. Individually they document, together they epitomize that advancement of science to which this association is dedicated.

There is a satisfying humility too about the manner in which you scientists have reported the results of your studies. If there is any criterion which sets the scholarship of this age above that of other ages it is that implicit recognition that what we do not know extends infinitely beyond our known horizons. I represent that section of your work which deals with medicine and public health. I have been asked to discuss one narrow sector within the broad scope of those two sciences, the sector of syphilis. It is a field of study which on the basis of its achievements in this century occupies a satisfying place in both medicine and public health. Syphilis, as Sir William Osler has said, is a great imitator. It mocks the symptoms of other diseases; but the physician has called upon the laboratory. We can diagnose syphilis more accurately than we can diagnose most diseases. Although the treatment for syphilis is a long and complicated one, medicine is surer of a cure than it is in the case of any other similarly serious disease.

Public health administration, on the other hand, has developed techniques which have made early syphilis a clinical rarity in several nations. I would devote myself to considering the scientific progress of our field as it relates particularly to medicine and public health.