PERSONAL ANNOUNCEMENT

20th DEATH-DAY OF A PROMINENT CZECH EPIDEMIOLOGIST KAREL RAŠKA, MD, DrSc.

On November 21, it will be 20 years since Professor Karel Raška passed away. He was an excellent scientist, organiser, and as a university professor, head of the Microbiology and Epidemiology Institute in Prague and later Manager of the WHO Division of Communicable Disease Control he influenced the professional career of not only dozens of Czech and Slovak epidemiologists, but he also went down in history as a campaigner against infections diseases due to his concept of eliminating small pox, which was adopted by the WHO General Assembly in 1964. The programme was launched and implemented until 1971 under Professor Raška's direct leadership. The programme of smallpox eradication was one of the few successful campaigns against infections organised by the WHO and thanks to its successful completion it saved not only dozens of millions of lives especially in developing countries, where the infection was endemic at that time, but also dozens of millions of dollars formerly expended on vaccine production, vaccination and anti-epidemic measures. Professor Raška's contribution to the fight against this infection was acknowledged in 1984 when he was awarded the Jenner Medal by the British Royal Medical Society and it was an irony that the primacy of Professor Raška, the father of smallpox eradication, was not recognised by the government institutions or the official Czechoslovak science at that time.

After graduating from the Medical Faculty of the Charles University in Prague, the Czech Republic, Professor Raška first worked as an army doctor – epidemiologist with the Microbiological Institute of the Medical Faculty of the Charles University. In 1938 he was commissioned to organise medical care at the camps of Czech refugees when the Sudetes were occupied and in 1939, at the age of 30, he was appointed the head of the Microbiology and Epidemiology Department at the State Health Institute. In this position he significantly contributed to liquidating a spotted fever epidemic at the concentration camp in Terezín at the end of the World War II and later, together with Professor Patočka, he arranged the medical aspects of the expatriation of Sudeten Germans. Since 1952 he was the director of the Epidemiology and Microbiology Institute of the Hygiene and Epidemiology Institute, which was the successor of the State Health Institute in Prague.

Since the end of World War II until his appointment to the position of the Manager of WHO Division of Communicable Disease Control in Geneva, he substantially influenced the creation of operational anti-epidemic services in former Czechoslovakia with his theoretical knowledge and experience and he substantially contributed to eliminating or significantly reducing the incidence of a number of infections, for example diphtheria, scarlet fever, pertussis, polio, abdominal typhoid, morbilli and hepatitis. He was also capable of mobilising co-operation among different scientific fields and government ministries, an example of which is the successful elimination of brucellosis and bovine tuberculosis in former Czechoslovakia.

From the perspective of world development of public health care, his share in elaborating the method of active infection surveillance must be emphasised, and these methods were practically developed and successfully applied in the smallpox eradication programme. He also participated in founding the world serum bank in Prague with the aim to study the development dynamics of the population's immunity to selected infections, the results of which contributed greatly to creating and managing immunisation programmes. Apart from his contribution in the public health protection field, we must also mention his primacy in introducing the penicillin treatment of scarlet fever, performing the first exsanguination transfusion in Europe, his pre-war studies of social and health aspects of prostitution in Prague and the first proof of the syphilis agent in the cardiac valve.

Professor K. Raška was a member of a number of scientific associations, among which the British Royal Medical Society and the Infectious Diseases Society of America can be considered as the most important. The most important acknowledgement of his work at the international level was the award of the above-mentioned Jenner Medal by the British Royal Society. Remembering the death-day of this excellent scientist and personality is only a small repayment for his life's work, due to which he is indelibly imprinted in the history of preventive medicine both at the national and international level.

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