

A CALL FOR COURAGE AND CAUTION

For health workers to stand up for the interests of the poor and to work toward changing the social causes of poverty, hunger, and poor health clearly involves a certain risk. The degree of risk will vary from country to country, and even from village to village.

For this reason, the openness with which health workers work toward social awakening and change, and the methods they use, need to be adapted to each local situation. For example, some of the village theater productions led by the Project Piactla team in Mexico (see Chapter 27) have resulted in attempts by local authorities to close down the villager-run health program. But in certain other countries in Latin America, health workers have been tortured and killed for doing less.

Unfortunately, countries where the health needs of the poor are greatest are usually the same countries where repression and violation of rights by those in control is most severe. These are the countries where leaders of the poor and those who work for social change are in greatest danger.

We urge planners and instructors of health workers, as well as health workers themselves, to move forward with their eyes wide open. Evaluate the possible benefits and risks of any approach or activity you consider, especially if it involves confrontation or conflict of interests. The risks of taking any particular step toward change need to be weighed against the risks of not taking that step: “How many people may suffer from repression if we take a stand on this issue? How many children will continue to die of hunger-related diseases if we don’t?”

Before training health workers in a people-centered approach, be sure that both you and they carefully consider the range of possible consequences.

We have had to struggle with these same questions in making the decision in this book to speak openly about social issues affecting health. We know we are taking a chance—both for ourselves and for others who care about people as we do. We hope and believe that in the long run the benefits will outweigh the costs. But each person needs to consider the balance and make their own informed decisions.

We urge those planners and officials who share the vision of a healthier, more self-reliant Inland for the poor to welcome criticism and suggestions from those working at the village and community level. If you are involved in a nationwide program to train health workers, help to defend and preserve those small, independent, community-based efforts that already exist. Learn from their strengths and weaknesses, criticize them and seek their advice and evaluation of your own program. Variety is essential for comparison and improvement.

At the same time, we urge those working at the community level, whether in government or independent programs, to look for ways to help the “voiceless poor” be heard and take part in decision making at the central level.

If those of us who share the vision of a more fully human future join hands and work together, perhaps “health for all” will, in fact, someday be possible.