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Lobbying for the limelight: World Health Assembly sparkles!

The World Health Assembly can often be a fairly dour affair. It starts with a series of interminable speeches from the world's ministers of health extolling the virtues of what they have done in the past 12 months. Deadly tedious for most but always good for a picture opportunity for the family back home of the honourable minister speaking at the lectern of the UN's Palais des Nations plenary hall. And then the meeting moves on through a series of issues and a few resolutions.

But something strange happened this year. It was lively! The corridors were buzzing, and political scheming was in full swing in the multiple coffee shops and restaurants within the complex. To add to the mix, there were various ex-ministers around, lobbying for the limelight once more, and also the intriguing body language of senior Global Fund officials in coffee shops asking difficult questions of country delegations (this requires a very tight huddle and low volume talk) about the lack of progress with one grant or another.

The BIG issue which exercised a lot of energy was international human resource recruitment. The Code has been long in gestation but finally it happened (see page 24 for the detail). Dearly, we hope this will be a significant moment.

Another issue of tension concerned the appointment of the Director General of the WHO. Currently it is the task of the Executive Board to draw up a shortlist and then nominate a candidate to the Assembly for approval. While Africa has on more than one occasion held the Deputy Director General's post, it has never held the top

post, and with the support of many other countries, pushed for the appointment to be made on a rotational basis. The North Americans and Europeans fought hard to reject the notion with the chief reason being that WHO is financed by voluntary payments from members, not by statutory allocation from the UN centre (and the USA contributes around 40% of the total). Therefore, they felt a slightly inexperienced person might threaten the very existence of the organisation. Africa of course rejected this out of hand and although they didn't win, the matter has gone back to the Executive Board with, I understand, recommendation for change AFTER the current DG, Margaret Chan has served her term(s).

Another 'hot' issue was intellectual property in both medical devices and pharmaceuticals. The committee room considering the issue was packed, as were the galleries looking in. At stake were some fundamentals of the status quo of intellectual property and patent law, facing up to a robust challenge from leading emerging nations, such as Brazil, who were wishing to remove protection against products that, if more affordable, can impact positively on the lives of the poor. In the end the lawyers seemed to win this time as time ran out, but it will be back as a top-of-the-bill issue next time.

All best

Bryan Pearson



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