History of the WHL

Its Gestation, Birth and Development – 1984 – to present

Founding an international organization takes time; money, though important, comes second; but, the precursor and sine qua non of an organization is the concept.

That hypertension is a worldwide problem was clear from epidemiological studies in the 1950's and 1960's. Research benefited greatly from the establishment of the International Society of Hypertension (ISH), around 1964, whose congresses greatly catalyzed exchange of research information; however, practical applications to populations seemed to be lagging behind research. The concept of hypertension control in populations, proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. National High Blood Pressure Education Program, fell on fertile ground in the 1970's. National leagues against hypertension started coming to life in a number of European countries (i.e., Italy, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Greece). They had both medical and lay members, and their aims were distinct from those of scientific societies.

In 1975 the idea of a European league was born in discussions between Franz Gross of Heidelberg, Cesare Bartorelli in Milan, and Tom Strasser in Geneva who, at that time, was working for the WHO. Drs. Gross and Bartorelli were members of the WHO Expert Committee for Cardiovascular Diseases and were involved in a number of WHO meetings on hypertension, in particular, mild hypertension. In 1973 WHO had established a Mild Hypertension Liaison Committee to link the ongoing trials on mild hypertension, preeminently a population problem.

In 1977 Dr. Bartorelli hosted a memorable conference at the Villa d’Este on Lake Como, gathering sixteen personalities from eight countries, and the concept of a European League against Hypertension was formulated. A second conference was hosted by Dr. Gross and the German League in Düsseldorf in 1980, which reinforced the idea of cooperation between the existing national leagues and WHO. At the third conference, which was jointly organized in Geneva in 1982 by the WHO and the International Green Cross, the concept of a wider association of anti-hypertension leagues was clearly defined, with aims "...complementary to WHO's hypertension control activities". As stated in the minutes of the conference, "A periodical newsletter ... should be the best medium for circulating information among the member leagues and societies." Drs. Gross and Strasser were assigned the task of drafting a blueprint of the bylaws. These were revised and supplemented by Drs. L. Hansson and J. Ménard and then circulated to all national hypertension leagues and societies, including those outside Europe.

Seven months later, on June 1, 1983, the Fourth Conference of the Anti-Hypertension Leagues and Societies, held in Milan, accepted the third draft of the Statutes, and concluded "to proceed with the establishment of the World Hypertension League when at least seven national leagues (societies, committees) have declared the intention to join". Candidates for membership quickly exceeded the magic number of seven, and with the financial support of the International Green Cross, the WHL was registered in Geneva as a non-profit international organization on January 4, 1984. The first annual conference of the now officially established WHL took place in Geneva on June 22, 1984, in the presence of the chairmen of fifteen national hypertension leagues and societies (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Israel, Italy, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the USA). The WHL then developed steadily to attain in 1994, 49 regular members, covering a major part of the globe, as well as 7 associate and 13 supporting members.

From 1984 to 1994 the WHL held 4 major symposia, and organized a World Conference on Hypertension Control in 1995 in Canada. From 1995 to 1999 the WHL has had two major Council Conferences and Workshops in Montreal, Canada and Buenos Aires, Argentina. The bibliography of WHL's publications, focusing on population aspects of hypertension control, has 15 entries.
At present, in 2001, the WHL has 81 member organizations and 11 supporting member organizations, for a total of 92 member organizations.

The World Hypertension League, and the world of hypertension, lost Franz Gross in 1984 and Cesare Bartorelli in 1991. Tom Strasser was the first Secretary-General of the WHL, and served faithfully in this capacity from 1984 to 1995*. Without them the WHL would not have been born. Their concepts, together with WHO’s, are built into the League’s foundations.

* In 1995 Patrick J. Mulrow was elected Secretary-General of the WHL at the Ottawa Conference in Canada.

Bringing together and stimulating organizations committed to the control of hypertension is the goal and the raison d'être of the WHL.