

The Puerto Rico Public Health Association

By JAMES A. DOULL

IN HIS presidential address at the inaugural session of the American Public Health Association in 1873 Stephen Smith spoke of the inherent attraction of sanitary science for men of ability and public spirit: "The field of labor upon which we enter is most inviting to the student of social science and to the philanthropist, for it embraces the highest interests of man and of human society." At the time, the expression was one more of hope than of fact, for public health had scarcely the rank of a profession anywhere, and its voice in government was correspondingly small. Of subsequent accomplishments suffice it to say that with each decade, and following closely upon scientific progress, the profession of public health has gained in the quality of its adherents, in dignity, and in influence.

Apart from its intrinsic importance the very breadth of the subject demands the attention of a diversified group of scientists and professional workers. Knowledge must be garnered from the basic sciences of biology, chemistry, mathematics, and physics, and from medicine, engineering, and sociology. From the scientific angle public health is something of a mosaic. Workers are united, not so much by educational or professional background, as by common interest and purpose.

Recognition of the importance and diversity of the field has led to the formation of the Puerto Rico Public Health Association. For the first time physicians, engineers, dentists, nurses, laboratory workers, social workers, and informed laymen may speak from a common forum.

Phenomenal progress has been made during the past few years in public health in Puerto Rico, but the handicaps, economic and other, are severe, and much remains to be accomplished. Substantial reduction in morbidity and mortality from dysentery, tuberculosis, and malaria, to mention the greatest health problems, is certainly possible. Complete eradication of these diseases would mean an addition of perhaps ten years to the expectation of life at birth. It would mean, also, an appreciable rise in the economic status of the Island, since these diseases contribute materially to unemployment and orphanage as well as to direct costs of medical care. What it would mean in terms of human happiness cannot be assessed even in such general terms.

It is scarcely necessary to emphasize the potentialities of the Association as an educational force for its own members. As at present constituted, full membership will bring each month the *Journal of the American Public Health Association*. The main feature of the annual meetings will be the scientific sessions at which original contributions and reviews should be of greatest value to all.

In respect to education the organization of the Association is especially timely. In recent years the Insular Department of Health has greatly expanded its services. The need for trained personnel has been much greater than the supply. Much will be accomplished by the Department of Public Health recently established in the School of Tropical Medicine, but it is obvious that it will be a number of years before a large proportion of public health workers will have received special training. The meetings of the Association, in addition to being a direct source of knowledge, should offer opportunity for useful exchange of ideas and experiences.

In his essay on "The Educational Value of the Medical Society," Osler touches upon one of the imponderables: "The first and in some respects the most important function is . . . to lay a foundation for that unity and friendship which is essential to the dignity and usefulness of the profession. Unity and Friendship."

The Association is fortunate beyond measure in having as its first officers and directors men and women of proven capacity in science and administration. Their selection testifies to the sound judgment of the members and augurs well for the future.