

DISEASES, OLD AND NEW

Ruy Perez Tamayo, *Old and New Diseases*, Siglo XXI

Old and New Diseases brings together material from a series of lectures Dr. Ruy Perez Tamayo delivered at the School of Medicine of the National Autonomous University of Mexico during March of 1985. The author maintained the style he used in his lectures, so the book is practically devoid of technicalities. Although scientifically precise, the writing is simple and direct, making this a medical text accessible to the layman. The book also makes for pleasant reading because of its photographs, engravings and abundant anecdotes.

The main theme in *Old and New Diseases* is the critique of the widespread notion that progress in medical science will eventually

lead to victory over disease and to a sort of health nirvana. According to the author, this idea has taken shape in the study of the history of medical progress. Perez Tamayo believes this conclusion is wrong even though the facts it is based on may be correct.

A state of perfect health for mankind is unrealistic for two basic reasons. One is that not all diseases are caused by external agents. Some result from human beings' constitution and development, from our anatomical and functional complexity. The second reason is that certain diseases change over the course of time. Some may change their features,

others come and go or even disappear entirely. And this is so basically because our pathology is to a great extent a reflection of our natural surroundings and of the conditions under which we live. Thus, despite technical and cultural advances, the only way man could possibly escape disease is if he ceased to be human and alive.

Perez Tamayo argues that we will never be free of disease, and that we must also be prepared to see much of it change. In support of his theory Dr. Perez Tamayo introduces a historical classification of disease in which he analyzes patterns of diseases throughout time, and comes up with four dif-

ferent groupings.

Constant diseases are those that have been present since recorded history and have maintained the same basic characteristics and development. **Variable** diseases are the ones that have undergone dramatic changes over the course of time, becoming either chronic or less serious, but nonetheless, constantly present. The third category is that of **Historic** diseases. These exist in specific historical periods and have disappeared because of man's action against them (smallpox, for example), or for reasons as yet unknown (coreomania). **New** diseases are the fourth and last category. Some of these may

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also be **variable** diseases, and it is difficult to find precise patterns for them.

Dr. Perez Tamayo believes that many of the factors that actually determine the persistence, variation, appearance or disappearance of disease are little known. Among these factors he includes variations in personal hygiene and natural surroundings, changes in food and occupational patterns, changes in physical conditions, psychological tensions and stress levels, etc.

The author uses this framework to go over each category with examples.

The idea that pathology is dynamic, as changing and versatile as life itself, is emphasized. Many diseases change over time because they are not permanent and autonomous, but rather result from different living patterns and as side effects of the way man adapts to his surroundings. This is why disease will be with us as long as we live.

Ruy Perez Tamayo was born in Tampico, Tamaulipas, in 1924. He took his degree in medicine at the UNAM School of Medicine and went on to get his Ph.D. in immunology at the National School of Biological Sciences of the National Polytechnical Institute, IPN. He has held teaching and administrative positions at several important national institutions, and has taught at Latin American universities in El Salvador, Nicaragua

and Guatemala, as well as at the National University of Colombia. He has lectured at the universities of Washington, Colorado and Kansas, and at Yale, Johns Hopkins, Rochester and Harvard. He has also taught in Geneva and at the Jimenez Diaz School in Madrid.

The author is presently on the editorial board of several medical and scientific journals, including the **International Review of Connective Tissue** and **Experimental and Molecular Pathology**. He has published fifteen books and numerous articles that have appeared in magazines, newspapers and medical collections. He was awarded the National Science Prize in 1974 and became a member of the National Guild in 1980. ★