

Who founded WHO?

To the Editor—I call attention to the current disgraceful, politically motivated race for the post of Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO). If indeed it is turning into a farcical power struggle, this danger must now be nipped in the bud. The South China Morning Post headlines “WHO contest seen as fight between China and Japan” (August 6) and “Margaret Chan may have slight edge in WHO race despite late start” (August 22) show that some have lost perspective of what the WHO is about.

The Chinese nation has every right to be proud of this institution. Before the United Nations Conference on International Organization opened on 25 April 1945, the US and UK delegates had consulted each other and agreed that no questions concerning health would be on the conference agenda. Unaware of these US-UK consultations, Dr Szeming Sze of the Chinese delegation and his Brazilian and Norwegian counterparts agreed to establish a new international health organisation. Dr Sze took the lead as China was then one of the four sponsoring powers of the Conference. After some twists and turns with administrative obstacles, a Declaration, drafted by Dr Sze, was overwhelmingly supported. This proved to be the beginning of the future WHO.¹

So who was this Dr Szeming Sze? In 1975, Henry Van Zile Hyde, Chief of Health Division during the Truman Administration, said of Dr Sze “...[he] was the member of the Chinese delegation. His father had been the Chinese Ambassador to England and the United States. And Szeming Sze was a very brilliant Chinese”. Born in 1908 Tientsin, Hopei Province,² he travelled by boat to England, in 1923, at the age of 15, along with his mother and brother Dedie.³ Dr Sze was a man of immense intellect with a superb command of the English language, educated in England at Winchester College, Cambridge University and St Thomas’ Hospital in London. At the end of a long international career, he became the medical director for the UN in 1954 until retiring in 1968.⁴ Dr Sze wrote in his personal memoirs that if he was not a doctor, he would have been a historian.²

In 1998, at the 51st World Health Assembly, the Norwegian Minister of Health, Mr Dagfinn Høybråten, acknowledged Dr Szeming Sze as “one of the initiators of the WHO”. Mr Høybråten quoted Dr Sze as saying “Of course we can learn from history. We learn from the mistakes made if not from the successes. Learning the reasons why certain things happened often saves us from making the same mistakes again”.

The world certainly learned a lesson from smallpox eradication. Despite centuries of variolation and later, vaccination, this scourge persisted until the WHO succeeded in 1980 after a 13 year campaign. From this success story, we learned that world health is critically dependent on international co-operation across national, political and economical obstacles. No institution is better suited than the WHO for this task.

Let us cherish our WHO, learn from history, be inspired by the enthusiasm of men like Dr Sze, honour his legacy, and now, appoint the best person for the job to the WHO leadership. The health of our planet is far too important to be trampled upon by politics.

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3. Archive Article – Szeming and Dedie – Oct. 1, 1923. Time website: <http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,716718,00.html>. Accessed 6 Aug 2006.
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The Hong Kong Academy of Medicine Press moved into its new office at Room 901 of the Academy Building in September. Pictured here are (from left): Warren Chan, Betty Lau, Yvonne Kwok, Margaret Harris Cheng, Richard Kay, and Cyrus R Kumana