

What is going to happen in Geneva?

Few people realise that without China there would have been no World Health Organization—certainly not the WHO as we know it today (see Letter: *Who Founded WHO?*). Yet the WHO has never had a Chinese Director General.

This is not for lack of excellent candidates or interest. The first Western Pacific Regional Director, Dr Fang I-Chi, was a native of Shantung who joined the WHO as Assistant Director, Field Services, in 1948, after being commissioner of the Kiangsi Provincial Health Administration.

China originally offered to host the WHO's Western Pacific Regional Office (WPRO) but the civil turmoil of the late 1940s made this infeasible, so in 1951 the WPRO moved from its first temporary office here in Hong Kong to Manila, where it has remained since.

Political and economic changes over the last half century have distracted China from issues like international health; arguably she is only now taking her rightful place as a major stakeholder. However, something else may be going on. There is an unwritten rule that none of the 'P5 countries'—the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (China, France, Great Britain, Russia and the United States of America)—will field a Director General (DG) for the WHO.

To date, this rule has been followed with the first DG being a Canadian (though an American was available and the headquarters were initially in New York), the next Brazilian, followed by a Dane, a Japanese, a Norwegian and lastly a Korean.

So when China announced Dr Margaret Chan's candidature, it sent shockwaves not only through Hong Kong, but also into the international health arena.



Dr Fang I-Chi
Source: WHO Archives

As nominations closed it became known that another P5 country, France, had also decided to field a candidate. There was also a surprising number of Europeans (5 of the final 13).

The DG selection is made by the Executive Board of 34 delegates from member states and the makeup of this committee is carefully balanced to ensure each of WHO's six regions is fairly represented. As the regions tend to support, at shortlist stage anyway, their own regional candidates, fielding too many from the one region is a poor tactical move. Only one, or at best two, is likely to make it to the final short-list of five.

This first stage of the process—whittling total applications down to 5 candidates—is when deals are made. All 34 delegates are asked to make a list of five candidates who will then be elected by secret ballot. It works a bit like a reality TV show with those delegates pushing particular candidates submitting tactical short-lists, such as four names they think will get very few votes plus the one they are backing.

It is at this stage—due to be on November 6-8—that a lot of horse-trading goes on. Deals like 'if you leave strong candidate X out, we will back your candidate Y' are struck. The lists are scrutinised and compared until a consensus is reached. This can take a long time. One or two candidates may make the list in the early rounds but the last three spots remain hard to fill with different delegates trying to get different names on or off.

The answer to the question now being asked in Geneva: 'what does China really want?' should be known by then. If it is really the DG job, Dr Chan may well secure the post. But if she is to be a pawn in a tactical move, she may not even make the shortlist.

MARGARET HARRIS CHENG

How the WHO Director General is chosen

Stage 1. Nomination

Candidates can be nominated by any of the 192 WHO member states. This year an unprecedented 13 candidates have been nominated by: China (Dr Margaret Chan), Ecuador (Dr Alfredo Palacio Gonzalez), Finland (Professor Pekka Puska), France (Dr Bernard Kouchner), Iceland (Mr David A. Gunnarsson), Japan (Dr Shigeru Omi), Kuwait (Dr Kazem Behbehani), Mexico (Dr Julio Frenk), Mozambique (Dr Pascoal Manuel Mocumbé), Myanmar (Dr Nay Htun), Spain (Ms Elena Salgado Menendez), Syria (Dr Karam Karam), Turkey (Professor Tomris Turmen).

Stage 2: Developing a Shortlist

The 34-member Executive Board made up of delegates from member states, regularly rotated to keep the regions balanced (currently: Africa 7, the Americas 6, Europe 8, Eastern Mediterranean 5, South East Asia 3, Western Pacific 5 including China), will meet from November 6 to select five candidates from the original 13. This can take several days: three days have been set aside for the entire selection process.

Stage 3: Secret Ballot

The Executive Board members will interview each of the five short-listed candidates then cast a secret vote for one of them.

Stage 4: Confirmation

The candidate who wins the secret ballot will be nominated as the next Director General and presented on November 9 to a special session of the World Health Assembly—a gathering of representatives from all member states—who will then vote on whether or not to appoint that person.