



## Mental Deficiency



The Working Group organized by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, which took place on 3-6 November 1980, had as its purpose the study of a problem of the greatest significance. Intellectual disability afflicts, in a conservative estimate, 3% of the world's population and, as His Holiness Pope John Paul II said in his Peace Message delivered on 1 January 1981, "should receive special attention as it constitutes the greatest obstacle to the full realization of man".

A group of eminent specialists were brought together to highlight this momentous question, even if only a small fraction of it could be examined. The problem is very vast and complex. It is appalling to learn that mental illness is increasing ever more, due to biological, socio-cultural and economic causes.

Together with the biological problems, which require more information on genetics, chromosomal traits and intrauterine life, socio-economic factors are of the greatest significance. The scientific approach has undoubtedly gained bigger momentum in recent decades and great progress is expected and achieved every year through research in the fields of genetics and chromosomal cytochemistry, as well as with results obtained from the study of the brain's biochemistry. In this field, a multidisciplinary approach has shown its importance. The most significant contribution comes from the fairly new interest in prenatal and foetal physiology and the study of the newborn child. Scientific research is thus advancing in this field, albeit slower than would be desired.

In the field of socio-economical and cultural variables affecting mental deficiency, there can be no doubt about the positive influence of wealth, nutrition and intellectual environment on the mental development of children. Their performance in school, as well as their social behavior as a whole, is a clear-cut proof of these factors. Poverty, as found in developing countries, is not only a co-factor but a factor per se of mental deficiency. Moreover, an abusive type of upbringing may, even

in affluent homes, lead to deficiencies. Thus, in developing countries, and in the inhuman dwellings found in so many cities of the industrialized countries, the greatest attention must be given to nutrition of pregnant women and of the newborn child. However, one must not forget how much better integrated, in family and society, are the mentally deficient who live in poor human agglomerations, particularly in developing countries, than in the affluent societies of the same countries. The tendency is to abscond or isolate them in hospitals. The mentally deficient child or adult needs attention, understanding, tenderness and comprehension, as much as mental therapy and pharmacotherapy.

The Working Group concluded that more knowledge must be obtained through research and that practical application of existing knowledge of methods of prevention and diagnosis should be extended. Why, for instance, is the early diagnosis of phenylketonuria restricted to the privileged classes in some countries? Why is this method of prevention not used at all in others? It also became clear that in order to prevent mental deficiency, more knowledge should be gained and that precise early diagnosis can increase the efficiency of therapy.

Together with prevention, great attention was given during the meeting to aid. Issues related to intellectual disability pertain not only to families, but to society as a whole. Wards, schools, homes, special education, care and assistance for the families of these disabled individuals, are a responsibility which the State cannot overlook.