Eight decades of evolution in public health from the perspective of the Institute of Epidemiological Diagnosis and Reference

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To become aware of our history is to become aware of our singularity. It is a moment of reflective repose before we devote ourselves to action again.

OCTAVIO PAZ¹

The Sanitary and Tropical Diseases Institute (ISET – *Instituto de Salubridad y Enfermedades Tropicales*) started operating in early 1938² and was formally opened on March 18, 1939, in commemoration of the first anniversary of the oil expropriation.³ At ISET, scientific studies were conducted to address epidemics and endemics caused by tropical or exotic pathologies, or those grouped in the so-called "colonial medicine". During five decades, ISET integrated a large number of interdisciplinary health research teams, contributed to the professionalization of prominent generations of Mexican sanitarians and obtained well-deserved international prestige.

With this solid and prestigious tradition, on the 50th anniversary of its opening, ISET became the National Institute of Epidemiological Diagnosis and Reference "Dr. Manuel Martínez Báez". This new stage, of just over a decade, was characterized by the contribution of the Institute for national seroepidemiological surveys⁴ and by a huge promotion of research.^{5,6} The promulgation of the Law of National Health Institutes during the first democratic transition in the year 2000, which aimed to regulate their organization and operation, promote research, teaching and the provision of services, formalized the Institute's subsequent evolution.⁷

Over the past 20 years, changes have been dramatic. The world was transformed in the face of the threat of international terrorism in September 2001, and the concept of biological risk acquired another meaning for public health laboratories. The national epidemiological surveillance system incorporated bioterrorism surveillance and the Institute implemented confirmatory diagnostic procedures for anthrax and other emerging diseases.⁸ Efforts were undertaken to implement an institutional quality assurance system in view of the ineluctable participation in newly formed regional and global networks. The establishment of the Global Health Security Initiative allowed the participation of the Institute in forums and discussions of the highest level. During the influenza pandemic in 2009, a diagnostic algorithm and a network of laboratories for influenza molecular confirmation were established throughout the country.⁹ The crisis generated by this public health emergency allowed the authorization of resources to build new and modern strategic facilities. The relocation of valuable biological materials, including historical collections of infectious substances, constituted a national special security event in terms of biological risk management.¹⁰

In eight decades of contributions to public health, the Institute has leaned on the work of its human capital. Throughout its history, the Institute has brought together (among executives, professionals and technical personnel) recognized public health experts, a permanent delegate of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and founder of *the National College* (for reference: <http://colnal.mx>), delegates participating in the constitution of the World Health Organization, a National Science Award winner, two undersecretaries of the

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branch and a large number of scientists who are members of the National System of Researchers, of the Mexican Academy of Science, as well as secretaries and presidents of the National Academy of Medicine of Mexico, all of them exponents not only of science and technology, but of humanist spirit. All this accounts for the training, the commitment, the size and the human talent the Institute has offered to public health.

In this context of leadership consolidation, on the 80th anniversary of its foundation, the Institute continues its evolution. The proposal to create the National System for Health Diagnosis, dependent on the nascent Sub-secretariat of Public Health,¹¹ will require the attributions, experience and tradition of the institution that, until today, has been the Institute of Epidemiological Diagnosis and Reference "Dr. Manuel Martínez Báez". For this transformation, the motive, the time, the place, the person, the means and the form will have to be considered. If all this is properly reflected and weighted, our country awaits success in terms of public health policy, with a fortified Institute and a firm vision into the future.

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