



No. 18

This is the eighteenth feature article on physicians in various parts of the world, picturing their endeavors and their achievements. In each case the physician is interviewed on the spot by a member of MD's editorial staff.

Photography by Bernard Cole.

Dr. Hernán Romero

of Chile

Dr. Hernán Romero, pediatrician, public health expert, world traveler, researches for one of his lectures, books or articles. Behind him is a handsome Tibetan screen he acquired while on a trip to the Orient.



The most widely traveled physician in all Chile, and perhaps in all Latin America, is one who has never taken a trip as a simple tourist. Although he has lived in the most remote corners of every continent, with the exception of Oceania, his traveling has always been in connection with his profession, to fulfill an assignment as a member of a medical mission or study group under the auspices of the World Health Organization, the International Labor Organization or the United Nations.

He is Dr. Hernán Romero who, when not in Brazzaville, Calcutta, Cairo, Copenhagen or Chicago, keeps a close watch on his country's health from his post as professor and chairman of the department of preventive and social medicine of the University of Chile. Aside from his teaching, Dr. Romero takes an active interest in Chile's Colegio Médico, the official medical association established by law in 1948 to represent the profession and to which all practicing physicians must belong,* is on the board of a number of societies and institutions, among them the Association for the Protection and Aid of Crippled Children and the National Committee for the Protection of the Family.

He was born in Santiago in 1907 into a family of Castilian extraction; his father, a lawyer by profession and at one time Chile's minister of education, was a gregarious, sociable man. The family home on Santo Domingo Street in the heart of Santiago, a rambling Spanish colonial type mansion with three enormous patios, was known to everyone for two reasons: its oxblood red facade and the hospitality of its inhabitants. Proverbial were the Thursday evening dinners and Sunday lunches never consisting of less than seven different courses. In this atmosphere the young Hernán and his two brothers and a sister spent their early years.

An avid reader from as far back as he can remember, Hernán early in his life discovered his love for teaching, founded his own school when he was fourteen, taught classes from eight to ten every evening throughout the years he attended the Instituto Andrés Bello for his secondary education and the University of Chile where he pursued his medical studies. During those early years his penchant for literature also led him to edit and publish *Retoños*, his own literary magazine.

Specializing in pediatrics under the guidance of the eminent Chilean pediatrician Dr. Arturo Scroggie, Dr. Romero obtained his M.D. degree in 1930, served for two years as Dr. Scroggie's assistant and established his own successful practice in his native Santiago. Engaged by the Braden Copper Company to set up and head a pediatric service in its mining center, Dr. Romero spent a year in Rancagua, pioneered a project which is still in operation today.

In the early 1930s Dr. Romero began what was to become an important aspect of his professional life,

traveling. Says he: "We Chileans are like Phoenicians, we love to travel. Perhaps this is due to the fact that both geographically and in spirit Chile has always been an island. Of all the American countries it is the furthest from Europe. It used to take over a month to get here by sea and for a considerable part of the year the heavy snowfalls in the Andes rendered them impassable. The Pacific Ocean was a back door, so to speak, to the world."

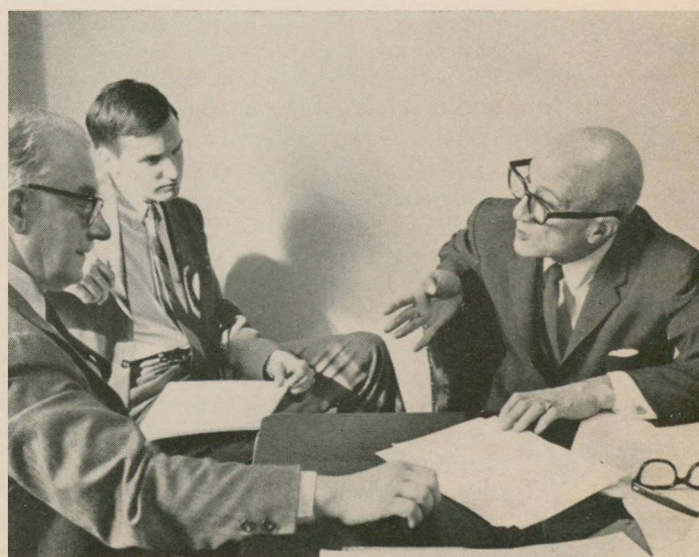
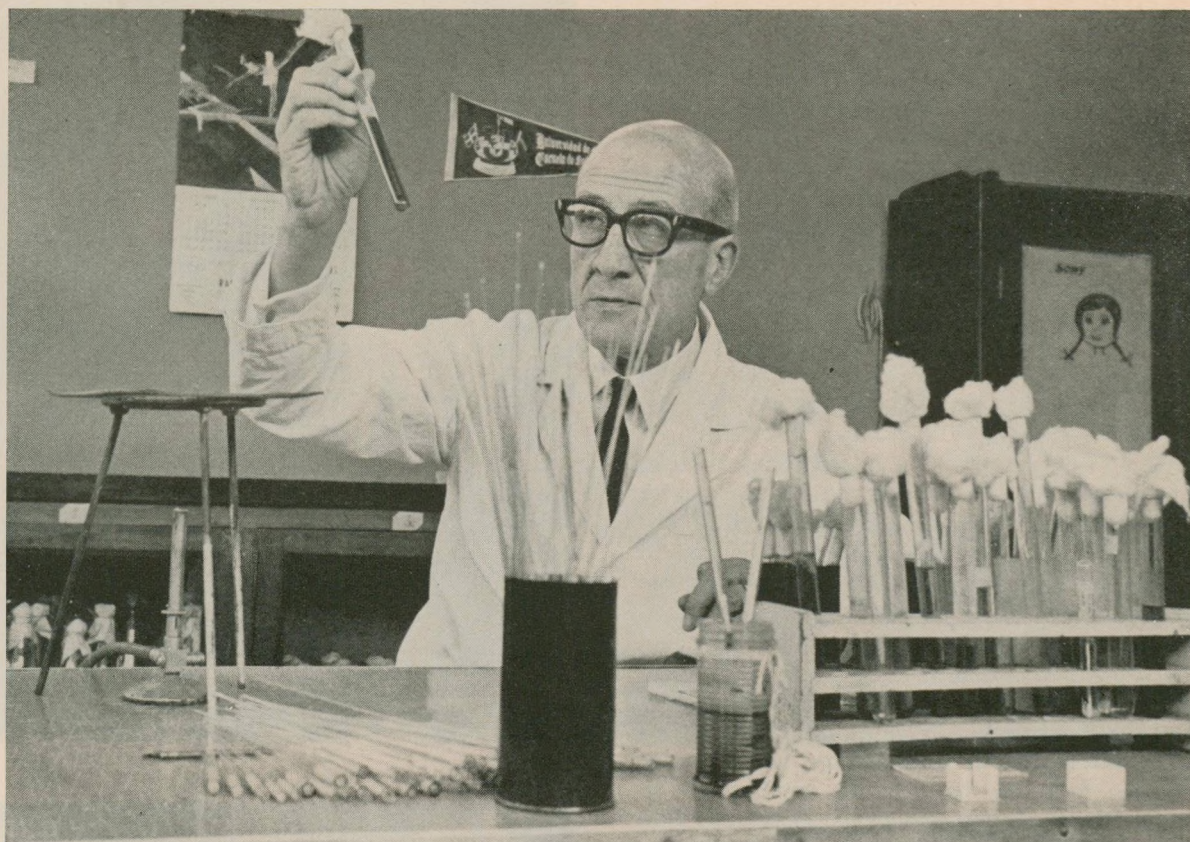
With a view to branching out into the field of public health, Dr. Romero traveled to the United States to enroll in a postgraduate course in public health administration and nutrition at the University of California. While there, his country's minister of foreign relations offered him the post as Chilean consul in New York and, although the University of California had granted him a scholarship to continue his studies, Dr. Romero decided to accept the post. Traveling across the country in a bus, he stopped in Chicago long enough to visit the 1933 World's Fair, went on to New York where he not only took charge of the consulate but, with a tuition fellowship, resumed his studies at Columbia University, obtaining his Master of Science degree in Public Health in 1935. Says he smiling: "At Columbia I was known as 'the busiest and the promptest.'"

After his sojourn in New York he traveled to London on the invitation of his father-in-law, at that time Chilean ambassador to the Court of St. James. While there, Dr. Romero went on a grand study tour of the Continent that took him to France, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Germany. Returning to Chile in 1936, he set out on what was to become his lifelong field of endeavor: public health and preventive medicine.

In 1941, with a Rockefeller fellowship, he returned to the United States, this time to study advanced courses in epidemiology, ecology, hygiene and industrial laboratory techniques at Harvard University. Comments Dr. Romero today: "Those of us who were fortunate enough to go to the United States for postgraduate studies, not only learned public health, but new ways of acting and thinking. We now look at the world with a wider perspective and our aim is to apply our foreign experience for our national benefit."

The opportunity to put his experience and unique background to work for his country came to Dr. Romero in 1943 when the University of Chile, in conjunction with the Rockefeller Foundation, created the School of Public Health and appointed him chairman and professor. Not long in gaining an international reputation, the school is presently considered the best of its kind in Latin America and draws students from all the other sister republics. In great part due to Dr. Romero's efforts, Chile has acquired a distinguished place in the field of preventive medicine and offers physicians the opportunity to specialize without having to go abroad. Says Dr. Romero: "Formerly our doctors had to complete their training elsewhere: now they can get all the training they need without ever leaving the country."

*Dr. Romero presided over the Colegio Médico from 1963 to 1965, is now on the advisory board.



At top, Dr. Romero works in a laboratory in the department of preventive and social medicine at the University of Chile. Left, he and assistants examine a cryostat machine given to the National Committee for the Protection of the Family in which he is active. Above, with UNICEF officials he discusses a translation of one of his papers, "Children and Youth in National Development."

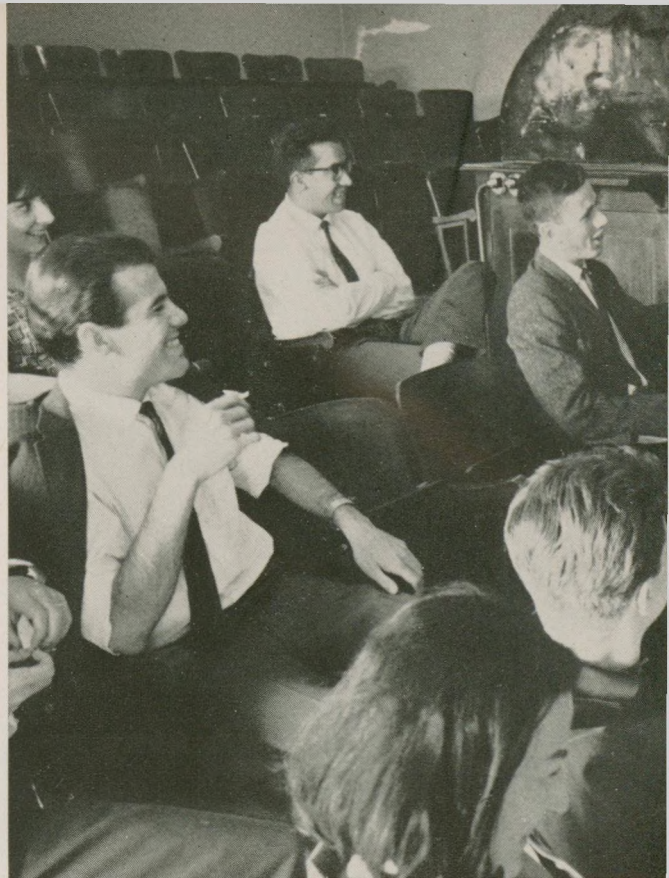
Thoroughly at home in the western world, Dr. Romero was given the chance to live and work among eastern peoples when in 1954 the World Health Organization sent him to India on a mission to teach and to study the possibilities of setting up a department of social medicine in the Pan Indian Institute of Hygiene and Health in Calcutta.

A second opportunity to renew his acquaintance with the East came when the International Labor Organization commissioned him as a technical adviser to establish a system of social security in Pakistan, shortly after it gained its independence. The fruit of these experiences are two illuminating books, *India, Enigma and Presence* (1956) and *Pakistan, Improbable and Real* (1959). Says he: "The need for medical attention is such in India and Pakistan that I became used to having people ask me for medical advice wherever and whenever they discovered my profession. Their concept of the medical profession is quite unique since they believe anyone can prescribe without diagnosing and medications are good only if they produce immediate and miraculous results."

Dr. Romero in 1956 was working on still another continent, this time Africa where, under the auspices of the World Health Organization, he was commissioned to gather basic health statistics and to organize the Conference on Vital and Sanitary Statistics held that year in Brazzaville. In spite of his frequent travels in underdeveloped countries it was in Africa that Dr. Romero picked up the only infection he ever contracted. Says he: "A fungus played a trick on me. Ever since my mission in Africa, during the summer, I always suffer from a recurrence of athlete's foot, much to the amusement of all my friends familiar with my sedentary life."

At 60, spare and reserved, with penetrating eyes in a roughly hewn face, Dr. Romero's schedule of work and travel has only been interrupted once by illness. An eye ailment that began to manifest itself mildly in adolescence became so acute in 1950 that he was forced to resign his administrative and teaching duties and seek medical attention at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins Hospital where his ailment was diagnosed as a chronic allergy. Although during the past 15 years his system has gradually become desensitized, Dr. Romero is convinced that his illness is to a great degree responsible for his basically stoic philosophy of life allowing him to adapt easily to situations as they come along. Comments he: "Fortunately, my ability to adapt is only comparable to that of the mouse: it can live just as well in the Antarctic as in the tropics."

He is married to Doña Luz Tocornal Ross, a member of one of Chile's aristocratic families, an active social worker and director of the School for Social Service. The Romeros, when in Santiago, make their home in a spacious modern apartment whose décor and furnishings are distinctly French in character. Their only child, 28-year-old Juan José, an agricultural engineer who studied at Cornell Uni-



Dr. Romero's weekend and summer refuge is the family fundo, "Las Vizcachas." From a tower he can look out at the majestic Andes, above, or in the setting of a Versaillesque formal garden and pool, opposite, enjoy tea with his wife.



At left, Dr. Romero informally conducts a medical seminar at the University of Chile. In his office at the university, below, he plays host to a group of Peruvian physicians visiting Santiago for a Latin American conference.



versity and later obtained his Master of Science degree at the University of California's Davis School of Agriculture, is presently connected with the Chilean ministry of agriculture. He and his attractive wife Carmen are the parents of four-year-old daughter Maria José.

A closely knit family, the Romeroes often enjoy an evening together to savor the gourmet delicacies and vintage Chilean wines (Dr. Romero considers them superior to a French *vin ordinaire*) that characterize their table. Chilean cuisine is almost entirely continental in flavor since the indigenous warring Araucanian Indians, aside from inspiring the first epic poem written on the American continent, *The Araucaniad* (1558), have contributed little if anything to present-day Chilean culture. After dinner coffee is served in the library, its walls lined with books from floor to ceiling, its windows facing a grove of trees and, in the distance, the ever present Andean range. In this relaxed atmosphere Dr. Romero says: "I consider it a privilege to live in Chile. Mind you, I don't mean to be chauvinistic, but where in the world do you find a country nowadays that offers both central heating and servants!"

In spite of his heavy daily schedule, Dr. Romero requires very little sleep, is usually awake between four and five in the morning. Says he: "Like the Japanese, I love the sunrise!" (Invited in 1960 to lecture in Japan, he later wrote a book, *Japan, People and Landscapes*). He has breakfast at seven. Carrying his lunch along (sandwich and fruit) he gets into his compact European car and dashes through Santiago's traffic-jammed streets to teach a class in epidemiology, biometry or pediatrics at the José Joaquín Aguirre Hospital, the university hospital, an active first-class scientific medical center. From there, he drives to the opposite end of the city to his office in the School of Public Health where, after attending to administrative affairs, he leaves for his favorite haunt: an office he shares with a fellow pediatrician where he has collected and installed one of the most complete libraries in Santiago.

Alongside his three idols, Pascal, Goethe and Bacon, one soon becomes aware of his literary eclecticism by discovering such authors on his shelves as O. Henry, James Joyce, Lawrence Durrell and his Spanish favorites Ortega y Gasset and Gregorio Marañón whom he considers a true master in the art of scientific *haute vulgarisation*. Equally at home in Spanish and English (he recently translated C. F. Brockington's *World Health*), Dr. Romero is also fluent in French and has a working knowledge of German. In the monastic quiet of his library where a handsome Tibetan screen and a large vase of fresh flowers lend an esthetic touch, Dr. Romero prepares his lectures, writes books and articles. His publications include some 200 titles, most of them dealing with some aspect of public health and safety.

A recognized authority on his country's health problems, Dr. Romero points out that they are neither endemic nor in any way related to climate and geo-

graphy but stem from economic and cultural underdevelopment. At the present time he regards alcoholism as Chile's main medicosocial problem. He attributes the high incidence (there are approximately 150,000 alcoholics in Chile) to two main causes: the Chilean male's concept of drinking as a sign of masculinity and the lack of activities to absorb leisure hours. In recent years the ever increasing participation in sports has alleviated the problem to some degree.

Second in importance is the high rate of infant mortality (112 per 1000) resulting for the most part from malnutrition and enteric diseases. Comments Dr. Romero: "Although the main obstacle hindering our campaign against infant mortality and a number of preventable diseases is basically of an economic nature, the more complex problem we are now faced with is the rapid increase in population, 2.5 percent or more a year, and the disproportionate growth of the city of Santiago where 1,500,000 people, more than a quarter of the country's entire population, are crowded together. This macrocephalia, common to all Latin American countries, constitutes a serious drawback to progress."

Although Dr. Romero enjoys an occasional game of bridge, is interested in experimental theatre and attends ballet performances, his only real hobby is his work and his only true relaxation is to spend weekends and summers on the family *fundo* "Las Vizcachas,"* a large country estate about 15 miles from the capital.

Leaving the highway, a narrow road winds its way to the top of an Andean foothill where, surrounded by flowering gardens, stands the sumptuous manorial house. At the back of the house is laid out a Versaillesque garden with a reflecting pool, trimmed hedges and classic statuary which forms a striking contrast with the rugged grandeur of the Andes in the background. In this setting, Dr. Romero enjoys wandering down the hill to fetch a quart of fresh milk for his granddaughter and to have a chat with the *guasos* tending his prize Holstein herd. His favorite stroll is along a footpath lined with shrubs and trees to the summit of the highest point on the estate where, from a small lookout tower, he sees to the west a panoramic view of greater Santiago stretching out in the valley below and to the east an unobstructed view of the snow-capped Andes tinted in pastel shades by the setting sun.

Philosophizes Dr. Romero: "I think I can consider myself a happy man. I like what I do and life has been generous to me. In my mind, teaching constitutes the highest goal any man of good will can aspire to. It is a way of giving back to society part of what one has received from it. If I gave up my professional practice years ago, it was because I was convinced that socially I would fulfill a more useful function by devoting myself to the task of improving my country's health."

*Vizcachas: Quechuan for an Andean rodent somewhat resembling a large squirrel.



A prize of Dr. Romero's collection of objets d'art is a treasured Gobelins tapestry, left. Below he helps his granddaughter Maria José, child of his son Juan José and daughter-in-law Carmen, seen in lower picture.

