



## Who is Dr. Alvarado?

¿Quién es el Dr. Alvarado?

Jauretche, Arturo<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT** This text, written by Arturo Jauretche, recovers the figure of Dr. Carlos Alberto Alvarado (1904-1986). When Ramón Carrillo was secretary of Public Health of the Nation, Dr. Alvarado led a campaign to control malaria in the Argentine northwest, achieving an important reduction in the number of cases and generating wide international repercussions. In 1955, Dr. Alvarado was resigned from his post by the Revolución Libertadora, at which time he was designated regional advisor by the Pan-American Health Organization, and later chief of the malaria eradication program of the World Health Organization in Geneva, Switzerland between 1959 and 1964. Upon his return to the country in 1966 he organized the Rural Health Plan and created the figure of the “public health agent” and “public health rounds,” anticipating concepts that would later be developed within Primary Health Care. Jauretche’s text was originally published in 1967 in the book *Los profetas del odio*, by the publishing house of Arturo Peña Lillo, editor of the great works of Argentine “national thought.” This re-edition in the section “Memory and history” is a way of paying homage to one of the indisputable leaders of Public Health in Argentina.

**KEY WORDS** History, 20th Century; Marsh Fever; Argentina.

**RESUMEN** Este texto, escrito por Arturo Jauretche, recupera la figura del Dr. Carlos Alberto Alvarado (1904-1986) quien, en tiempos en que Ramón Carrillo era secretario de Salud Pública de la Nación, dirige una campaña que logra controlar el paludismo en el noroeste argentino con una reducción muy importante del número de casos, alcanzando una amplia repercusión mundial. En 1955, el Dr. Alvarado es separado de su cargo por la Revolución Libertadora, momento en que la Organización Panamericana de la Salud lo designa asesor regional y entre 1959 y 1964 lo nombran jefe del programa de erradicación de la malaria de la Organización Mundial de la Salud, en Ginebra, Suiza. A su regreso al país en 1966, organiza el Plan de Salud Rural, creando para ello la figura del “agente sanitario” y la “ronda sanitaria” anticipándose a conceptos que varios años después se plasmarían en la Atención Primaria de la Salud. El texto de Jauretche fue publicado originalmente en 1967 en el libro *Los profetas del odio*, por la editorial de Arturo Peña Lillo, editor de los grandes títulos del “pensamiento nacional” argentino. Su reedición en la sección “Memoria e historia” es un modo de rendir homenaje a una de las figuras indiscutibles de la Salud Pública argentina.

**PALABRAS CLAVE** Historia del Siglo XX; Paludismo; Argentina.

<sup>1</sup>Argentine thinker, writer and politician (1901-1974).

If you want to meet him personally, you have to travel to Lozano, on the way to Quebrada de Humahuaca, where he owns a small “motel” that can offer you hospitality. It’s likely that the press will make him famous as a hotel manager; unfortunately, it’s less likely that they will propose him as candidate for the Nobel Prize or the Academy of Sciences!

Dr. Alvarado, a scholarly researcher, was part of the former Argentine National Department of Hygiene, where he specialized in fighting malaria. At that time the whole Argentine Northwest was a critical malaria-endemic region with 120,000 new cases every year. The procedures implemented to fight this disease, transmitted by a specific mosquito, were the usual ones: clearing the banks along streams and canals, maintaining water flow to keep the water from stagnating, and, in the absence of more effective preventive measures, distributing quinine tablets to the ill and to other potential victims. (I still remember how my ears would buzz from the effect of the quinine every time I traveled to the endemic region: Santiago del Estero, La Rioja, Catamarca, Tucumán, Salta. The fight of the National Department of Hygiene was unsuccessful because the disease affected natives of the region who had been undernourished in their childhood, a situation that is being repeated currently thanks to those who take it upon themselves to drive the country to “international levels” of economic solvency).

Dr. Alvarado based his work on an observation: in areas with a typically malaria-prone climate, like Chaco, Formosa, Corrientes, and Misiones, with marshes and jungles and humid tropical weather, epidemic outbreaks would appear and would then eventually disappear; but in the Northwest, the disease was endemic, with a continued and localized action, precisely in places where there were neither marshes nor dense vegetation. In fact, the only stagnant water was found over sand and among the rocks, in the overflow of the Andean and Aconquija rivers, with abundant sun and fresh air. This led Dr. Alvarado to believe that the mosquito that transmitted the disease belonged to a different species than the traditional mosquito. Long years of research based on this idea proved that, unlike the larvae of the classical malaria mosquito, which needed a humid and dark environment to thrive,

the mosquito that transmitted the disease in the Northwest required its larva to be exposed to sunlight and clean water.

This discovery is much more important, technically speaking, than Dr. Houssay’s, which was the product of chance and the observations of others. And its importance is even greater if considered from a national and social perspective.

It implied a revolution in the way malaria was fought, and Dr. Alvarado had to confront the entire bureaucratic and scientific apparatus, known for its adherence to routines and its opposition to any kind of innovation.

However, at that time (1945), a new national force was set in motion. Dr. Ramón Carrillo, based in the Ministry of Public Health, began to take on a preventive approach to medicine, contrary to the curative approach that had prevailed until then. Defying the resistance and horror of acclaimed experts, he put his full weight behind Dr. Alvarado’s work, giving him freedom and resources with which to operate. On the basis of Dr. Alvarado’s discovery, the systematic application of DDT and massive action, malaria disappeared from the Argentine Northwest in less than two years. From 120,000 cases a year, the figures dropped to 120! To 1 in 1,000! This was the greatest medical achievement made in Argentina and perhaps in the world. That is how people outside of Argentina must have seen it, because when, as a way of showing gratitude for his great work, Dr. Alvarado was forced to resign from his position in 1955, he was summoned to work abroad and for several years was the Director of the United Nations body in charge of the worldwide fight against malaria.

If they fired him, they certainly were not going to propose him as candidate for a Nobel Prize or for the Academy of Sciences. The big press has meticulously concealed this achievement and the name of the person who made it possible – Alvarado – as well as the name of the person who encouraged him – Carrillo – who himself died in extreme poverty several years ago in Belén, Brazil. His remains still lie there because the government of that time would not allow them to be repatriated.

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