In Memoriam: François Delange

Basil Hetzel, Creswell Eastman, Claude Thilly ICCIDD Executive Board

François Delange died on 15th June 2007 in Brussels following cardiac surgery. His death was a shock experienced by the thyroid scientific community throughout the world. François was a founding member of ICCIDD and served from 1986 as the first ICCIDD Regional Coordinator for Europe. He was an outstanding paediatrician and thyroidologist, particularly in the field of congenital hypothyroidism. He became Professor of Paediatrics at the Free University of Brussels.

He made a major contribution to iodine research in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as part of the Belgian group led by Dr Andre Erans and Dr Jacques Dumont. François was responsible for studies over a 10 year period on hypothyroid (endemic) cretinism as seen on Idjwi Island on Kivu Lake (see photograph on following page). His work attracted great interest and led to a visit to Idjwi Island by John Stanbury, a leading thyroid expert.

As Regional Coordinator for Europe, he made extensive country visits to establish cooperation with local scientists. In 1992, he organized the ICCIDD Regional Meeting in Brussels on ‘Iodine Deficiency in Europe: A Continuing Concern’. He was Senior Editor of the report that provided the first comprehensive review of IDD status in European countries, including Eastern Europe.

In Germany, Merck KGaA had begun to use a mobile van with facilities for the determination of thyroid size (ultrasound) and storage of urine samples for iodine determination. François was consulted with a view to its use throughout Europe, and he was enthusiastic about the idea. A collaborative team was established at the 1993 and 1994 meetings of the European Thyroid Association, and led to ThyroMobil campaigns on five continents: Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America and Australia. The ThyroMobil model was used for the standardized evaluation of iodine nutrition in a total of 38,619 schoolchildren selected from 432 sites in 31 countries. For a detailed summary of the ThyroMobil program, please see: Delange F et al: ‘The Story of the ThyroMobil’ (Thyroid International 1/2007, Merck Serono).

In 1995, François became ICCIDD Executive Director, following Basil Hetzel. He led the important ‘7 Country Study in Africa’ which investigated salt iodization programs and the occurrence of iodine induced hyperthyroidism, first reported from Zimbabwe in 1995. He was Senior Editor of an authoritative report of the 1996 WHO/UNICEF/ICCIDD meeting on this topic, which resulted in more careful monitoring of salt iodine levels throughout Africa and the world.

In 1997, François organized a meeting on IDD in Europe, in Munich, including a series of papers on thyroid cancer from Eastern Europe following the Chernobyl disaster. Delange was Senior Editor of the Report of the meeting that led to increased support from UNICEF and WHO for new IDD control programs in Eastern Europe. His colleague, Gregory Gerassimov (who was Sub-regional Coordinator) played an important role in these programs, with strong support from UNICEF.

Following the 1998 ICCIDD Board Meeting, François was responsible for the revised ICCIDD Global Action Plan (1999-2001), emphasizing sustainability of country programs by effective monitoring of both iodized salt and urine iodine levels. This culminated in the 2001 ICCIDD/UNICEF/WHO Handbook on the ‘Assessment of Iodine Deficiency Disorders and Monitoring their Elimination – A guide for program managers’ in which he played a major role. Beginning in 1996, François represented ICCIDD at the Sub-committee on Nutrition (SCN) of the UN Agencies, to which he reported each year as Executive Director.

In 2001, his magnificent contribution to ICCIDD was suddenly interrupted by illness (severe acute pancreatitis), which led to his resignation. In due course he recovered and continued to produce important papers, focusing on pregnancy and infancy, for which he was the major ICCIDD scientific resource. He was a frequent consultant for WHO, UNICEF, the International Atomic Energy Agency and Belgian Cooperation. It is ironic that, just a couple of months ago, after more than 30 years of scientific work and lobbying of the Belgian government, François was informed that the government was ready to finally introduce legislation on iodine supplementation during pregnancy and lactation.

In early 2007, the ICCIDD Board of Directors nominated François for the newly established ‘JT Dunn Distinguished Service Award’ for exceptional service to ICCIDD and the elimination of IDD. This was fitting recognition of his outstanding contribution and was much apprecia-
François Delange, working on IDD in Zaire, addressing a group of adolescent cretins. A normal subject of the same age is standing in the background.

François was born in 1935, studied medicine at the University of Brussels and graduated with an MD in 1960. He became one of the few medical doctors to obtain double specialty recognition in 1981 (pediatrics & nuclear medicine). His PhD thesis was completed in 1973.

François spent most of his professional career in the department of Pediatrics at the University Hospital Saint Pierre, until he retired at the age of 60, in 1995. This allowed him to pursue and develop his life long interest in IDD within ICCIDD.

François received many professional awards, including the ETA Merck prize in 1997, and authored or co-authored 12 books, 361 publications including original articles, chapters of textbooks, monographs, and proceedings of international congresses. His research activities began in 1960, and from the start, his interests were the clinical and experimental aspects of the physiopathology of pediatric thyroid disorders. His main interest was the study of IDD.

François was also a pioneer in the use of neonatal screening for congenital hypothyroidism (CH). Under his leadership, systemic screening for CH was initiated in Europe at the end of the 1970s, using TSH determination as the prime target. He had to fight hard with his American colleagues who, at that time, advocated total T4 determination as the main target of screening for CH.

A great clinical scientist, and for his wisdom, courage, idealism, scientific honesty, and witty sense of humor, François will be deeply missed by all those who knew him well, his many friends in Brussels and around the world, and probably even his few enemies. We feel honored to have been his lifelong friends.

We salute him with admiration and gratitude and extend our deep sympathy to his wife Nicole and other family members.