

Regional Office for the Rio de la Plata and the Andean Region: Circulation of Ideas and Key Players, Argentina (1941–1949)

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Abstract

This report examines the activities carried out by the Regional Office of Río de la Plata and Andean Region of the Rockefeller Foundation to upgrade the training of public health professionals and staff from 1941 to 1949. According to the Rockefeller Foundation, special skills and training were essential to address the challenges posed by the eradication of epidemics and pandemics, necessary public works to enhance public health. The regional office was based in Argentina, Chile, Perú, Ecuador, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Paraguay.

Key Words: Rockefeller Foundation, International Health Division, Sanitary Training.

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During my stay at the Rockefeller Archive Center, which is the repository for the archives of the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), I worked to identify the ideas and ties that malaria expert Lewis Wendell Hackett had as Director of the RF Regional Office for the Rio de la Plata and the Andean Region. The corpus in question was made up of Hackett's personal diaries, annual memoirs, speeches, correspondence and photographic files, all dating from between his arrival to Argentina (1941) and his departure (1949). All these documents have revealed Hackett's views on the region's public health system, his sharp ideas regarding politics and society, his criticism towards the local culture and customs, and his diagnosis of the scientific scenario, the public health system and the education of health care staff. The research carried out during my stay was invaluable for writing several articles, which were later published in renowned national and international journals, and communicate the potential of these documents for the Argentine case to my research team.² The goal of this report is to assess the initiatives carried out by the Regional Office for the Río de la Plata and the Andean Region, with a focus on those activities related to the education of health care staff in Chile and Argentina.

Education of Health Care Staff

One of Hackett's diagnoses for the region centered on the fact that the health system lacked well-trained staff and an organized body of nurses. Among the programs aimed at training health care staff, the Chilean case was used as a role model, since the implementation of such programs in Chile contributed to developing public health and training staff. From 1944 to 1952, specialization programs, as well as full-time and paid training opportunities (based on responsibilities), were developed.³ The School of Public Health was also created in 1944, which reported to a university. It was financed by the RF until 1949, and since then, it has received financing from the Chilean Government. It was established to train health officials, health engineers, public health nurses, nutrition specialists, as well as other technical experts, and to operate as a teaching and training medical facility. By 1954, the institution's reputation had grown so that it had become an important health resource for the region. Doctors, health educators and nurses from Argentina took part in exchange programs at the School of Public Health, with the RF also providing scholarships to professionals who travelled to study there.⁴

In 1941, the RF, in collaboration with local, health and higher education authorities, tried to carry out a similar initiative in Argentina, aimed at providing public health and nurse training. Among other aspects, the initiative was centered on the School of Nurses of Rosario, which belonged to the Universidad Nacional del Litoral. In the speech Hackett gave at the Rotary Club in Buenos Aires on March 26, 1941, he underlined the importance he gave to nurses and health educators. His diagnosis of the situation in Latin America defined local training as poor and highlighted the need to connect it to higher education institutions.⁵

After the revolution that took place in Argentina in June 1943, the new authorities interrupted the activities of the RF in the country. The nationalist and anti-American ideas that emerged with the coup, together with the neutrality policy adopted during World War II, led to the interruption of official relationships between the RF and the Argentine authorities. However, informal ties were kept after the coup. In fact, the RF's administrative staff continued to work in the foundation's offices in Buenos Aires, and meetings with different scientists were also held.

After the elections of February 1946 and the coming into power of President Juan Domingo Perón (1946), the Argentine Government cut all ties with the RF, and programs were no longer implemented.⁶ In his diaries, Hackett's views about the health reforms carried out in Argentina by Secretary of Health Ramón Carrillo are of particular interest. Hackett saw those reforms to be reflecting the proposals promoted by the RF in previous decades. Among the policies in place were the construction of new health facilities, an increasing number of campaigns against endemics and epidemics, and the establishment of new training facilities for doctors and nurses.⁷ Nevertheless, Hackett highly criticized the prevalence of political preferences over technical skills in the appointment of staff. He said: "The majority of Carrillo's staff are incompetent or fanatics."⁸ Hackett's views were similar to those of liberal sectors of society, who considered the first wave of Peronism a sign of "barbarism" with strong implications for Argentina's scientific development. The nationalist stance on science and technological development that defined the first term in office of Perón clashed with the views of liberal sectors who advocated for a more international role of science, where the exchange of ideas and experiences between countries was central.

Although promoting and informing about those cases that favored the modernization of the public health system, Hackett was actually very pessimistic about the possibility of sustained progress occurring in Latin

America over time. He believed that the difficulties in plan execution in the region were related to issues inherent to Latin America's culture, customs and social structure. The methods, organizations and jobs that Hackett and others tried to promote clashed with the region's political, social and economic traditions.⁹ In addition, Hackett did not agree with the fact that health officials worked part-time or had no educational background in public health. According to him, health officials were either clinicians or lawyers, and nurses lacked proper training, worked without coordination and were underpaid. He was of the opinion that it was necessary to promote a restructuring of the health system, which would require the collaboration of professionals, health officials and universities. Hackett believed that the lack of public health specialists was mainly due to low job security, as employment in the sector was underpaid and subject to political changes. Although Hackett's speeches showed his constant desire for an increase in technical training and the promotion of scientific research mechanisms that were not related to political circumstances, he himself did not put his ideas into practice. He was involved in political matters and was well aware of the fact that political ties could either further scientific projects or prevent them from happening. Hackett resorted to scientific arguments to legitimize his behavior, which was put into question due to his political maneuvers, which he easily mastered.

My first reading and analysis of the material collected from the RF Archives was an opportunity to reflect on the influences the RF had on health policies in the region. This influence was not the result of the actions of a single actor, and its reception was not passive either. The intricate network of actors, practices and strategies between the RF's regional delegates and local representatives has raised questions about the dissimilar ties between the RF and the region's science and health representatives, as well as the different negotiation strategies and courses of action chosen.

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² Some of the articles that had been published in prestigious journals and a chapter of a books which are *La internacionalización de la salud pública. La Fundación Rockefeller y su mirada sobre la Región Andina y el Río de la Plata (1941-1950)* in Norberto Ferraras, Andrés Stagnaro y Laura Carusso (eds.), A Conexao OIT América Latina, Mauad Editora, Rio de Janeiro, 2018; “La Fundación Rockefeller y la División Internacional de Salud en el Río de la Plata y la Región Andina. Ideas, concreciones y obstáculos (1941-1949),” in *Redes*, Vol. 23, N° 45, 2017, pp.97-121. <http://www.unq.edu.ar/advf/documentos/5b15787d67375.pdf>; “Los ingenieros sanitarios en la salud pública argentina entre 1870 y 1960” (Federico Rayez), *Trashumante. Revista americana de Historia Social*, N°11, 2018, pp. 122-143. DOI: 10.17533/udea.trahs.n11a06; “Telma Reca en la gestión estatal de la sanidad argentina (1930-1948),” in *Asclepio. Revista de Historia de la Medicina y de la Ciencia*, Vol. 70, N 1, enero-junio 2018. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3989/asclepio.2018.04>, and “La capacitación en salud pública en la Argentina entre 1900-1960” (Carolina Biernat y Federico Rayez), *História Unisinos*, Vol. 22, N°4, 2018, Doi: 10.4013/htu.2018.224.10.

³ Bruce Sasse, “Annual Report for Chile – 1952”, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 5, Series 300, Box 104, Folder 1355.

⁴ Lewis Hackett, “Semi Annual Report for 1946”, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 5, Series 300, Box 103, Folder 1337: 2.

⁵ Lewis Hackett, “Discurso en el Rotary Club el 26 de marzo de 1941 en Buenos Aires”, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Series 3, Box 14, Folder 160. See also Lewis Hackett, “La salud pública hoy y mañana”, *Revista de Sanidad*, La Plata, 1948-1949, Vol. I: 10.

⁶ Lewis Hackett, “Annual Report for 1946”. Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 5, Series 300, Box 103, Folder 1338:2.

⁷ Karina Ramacciotti, *La política sanitaria del peronismo*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Biblos, 2009.

⁸ Lewis Hackett, *Diary 1947*, Buenos Aires, May 6, 1947 – Tuesday. Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 12, Page 85.

⁹ Lewis Hackett, “General Review for 1944”, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 5, Series 300, Box103, Folder 1329: 3 and “Annual Report for 1945, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 5, Series 300, Box 103, Folder 1335.