We need to look back if we are to plan for the future. The last century has seen many dramatic discoveries but also many changes in the way tropical health is conceptualized. In coping with great epidemics around 1900, first microbiology and then entomology led the field. Some time after, they were followed by epidemiology and then, much later, by molecular biology and the social sciences. All are needed for a coherent and sustainable approach to tropical disease problems. By analysis of success stories in disease control, including oral rehydration, insecticide-treated mosquito nets, smallpox eradication and the management of severe malaria; of mixed experiences as with health care delivery and attempted malaria eradication; and of the new and unexpected problems that have emerged in recent decades, notably HIV/AIDS, multiple drug resistant malaria and bacterial infections, we can gain a picture of the challenges and opportunities ahead.

There are persistent and intractable problems of war, marginalization, forced migration, and above all, poverty. Also there are opportunities, both at the molecular level with the coming of complete genome sequences and also at the global level with improved ability to predict climatic changes in both the short and longer run, together with ability to handle the spatial aspects of epidemiology and to intervene successfully in life-threatening illness. The simpler problems are being solved: we now need to make a better job of the complex ones that require multidisciplinary action.