

Carta al Editor

Dear Editor:

It is a pleasure to send my congratulations to the Instituto Nacional de Biología Andina (INBA) on the occasion of its 75th anniversary. This institute has played a major role in the development of our knowledge of high altitude medicine and biology. In addition, since the INBA belongs to the Faculty of Medicine of the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos (UNMSM), this is an opportune time to refer to the University's links with the early history of high altitude diseases.

When Joseph D. Acosta (1540-1600) sailed from Spain to Lima in about 1570, the University of San Marcos was already established. As is well-known to those of us interested in the history of high altitude medicine, Acosta journeyed into the Andes and gave some of the first dramatic accounts of acute mountain sickness. Near the top of Mount Pariacaca, he related that "I was surprised with such pangs of straining and casting," and he continued with the famous phrase "I therefore persuade myself that the element of the air is there so subtle and delicate, as it is not proportional with the breathing of man, which requires a more gross and temperate air, and I believe it is the cause that doth so much alter the stomach, and trouble all the disposition." Acosta's book, first published in 1590, became widely known and was read, for example, by Robert Boyle who subsequently made some of the earliest experiments of the effects of rarified air.

More than 350 years later, Carlos Monge Medrano (1884-1970) carried out his classical studies on high altitude residents in the Andes and described Chronic Mountain Sickness (Monge's disease), which is still a subject of intense investigation. These and related studies resulted in the formation of the INBA. The influence of this school has been immense. For example, one of Monge's colleagues, Alberto Hurtado, gave a lecture to the American College of Physicians about high altitude medical problems in Peru, and as a result, Herbert Hultgren, a cardiologist at Stanford University, visited the Chulec General Hospital in La Oroya, Peru, and recognized a new disease for the English-speaking world, high altitude pulmonary edema. The influence of the Peruvian group working on high altitude medicine and biology continues to this day.

Again it is a pleasure to recognize the enormous influence of the Instituto Nacional de Biología Andina, and salute its parent university, which has the distinction of being the oldest in the NewWorld.

John B. West, M.D., Ph.D., D.Sc
Distinguished Professor of Medicine and
Physiology School of Medicine
University of California, San Diego
San Diego, CA 92093-0623A
Tel: (858) 534-4192

e-mail: jwest@ucsd.edu