

The public health role of the World Health Organisation through its postal record

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Abstract. Founded in 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) operated within the United Nations to address global public health issues. This paper examines whether philately was a successful strategy in helping WHO to influence health priorities and information needs in Member States. An historical basis for a postal strategy existed pre-1948 when health themes were used by the Red Cross and for Charity stamps. Initially (1948-1958) no specific public health stamps were issued but adoption of a WHO emblem promoted the organization's reputation when included on postal stationary. From 1958 to 1978 stamps were notably issued for malaria programmes, smallpox eradication, child health, nutrition and vaccination. Member States released four billion stamps for the 1962 Malaria Eradication Programme omnibus issue while the popularity of the 1966 stamp showing, and inaugurating, WHO headquarters in Geneva legitimised its international status. WHO's reputation was built on technical expertise as well as visual imagery, including photographs and postal stationary. Whether stamps raised health awareness as part of a multifaceted communication strategy could not be determined. Although Commemorative and World Health Day stamps continued to be issued in later decades, WHO shared the public – and political – health platform with other agencies. It lost its unique role in determining public health priorities and Member State stamp issues which are now generated for a multiplicity of topics. Postal revenues, rather than health messages, motivate Member States, such that stamps are no longer seminal to WHO's role.

Key words: public health, World Health Organisation, world health day, united nations, postal stamp, anniversary

Introduction

Since its foundation in 1948 over a hundred National Postal Administrations (NPAs) of Member States of the World Health Organisation (WHO) have used stamps to celebrate their public health activities. These State postal issues portray, communicate and provide visual authority for health messages and in so doing reflect WHO's changing role and health policy priorities. An organisation such as WHO, within the United Nations (UN), was needed after the second World War to co-ordinate and address world health issues (1). This paper examines these issues as depicted

in the philately and associated insignia which contextualise the history and health priorities of WHO, which celebrated its 75th Anniversary in 2023. The paper assesses how WHO, in its evolving public health role, influenced the production, themes and design of stamps within UN agencies and NPAs, and the extent to which this may have influenced public health.

Methods

The number and periodicity of successive Anniversary and Commemorative postal issues were

analysed from 1948 when WHO was founded, to 2023. Member States of WHO and non-Member countries listed in the six volume Stanley Gibbons Stamps World catalogue were screened (2). On-line listings of all NPAs were checked for these years to identify decennial celebrations as well as the 25th, 65th and 75th WHO Anniversaries in 1973, 2013, and 2023, in addition to stamps issued for the official inauguration of WHO (1966) at its headquarters in Geneva. The significance of incorporating the WHO emblem in Nation State issues, and the number of postal issues by Member States in each WHO region, were examined. Issues by the Pan American Health Organization, whose foundation pre-dates 1948 were excluded (3). On-line listings of NPAs were checked to 2023 using Web search engines and PubMed.gov searched for references in English or French using the terms: World Health Organization, Organisation Mondiale de la Santé, health communication, knowledge translation, commemorative, country name, anniversary date, philately, stamp, postage stamp. Analysis of stamps designs was informed by recurring themes, national public health campaigns, historical events, date of issue, variety of symbols, images, and slogans, including use of the WHO emblem as an iconic symbol. The number of NPA postal issues associated with WHO for each of the six WHO regions, and for the UN, were categorised by year and Anniversary date. Public health representation by NPAs prior to 1948 were identified using web searches, PubMed.gov, and the author's private collection on medical philately.

The historical basis (pre-1948) for WHO's postal strategy

Early public health representations by postal administrations had been used prior to WHO's foundation. Two stamps were released on 26th June 1897 in New South Wales, Australia, to mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and to raise money for a tuberculosis (TB) charity supported by the Queen (Figure 1) (4). This was the first public health initiative using postal stationery to raise financial contributions from the public to fund treatment of a specific disease and the first example of "charity stamps". Globally, tuberculosis was a major cause of death and the Netherlands in 1906 issued a set on behalf of the Amsterdam Society for the Prevention of Tuberculosis. Following the First World War other nations followed suit with surcharges supporting anti-TB Funds to 'help stamp out tuberculosis' (e.g., Danzig in 1921, Hungary in 1924, Belgium and Luxembourg in 1925 and New Zealand in 1929).

Some designs illustrated nursing care, others were schematic, and several provided no text to justify the charity surcharge. The New Zealand Postal Authority has continued to annually produce new stamps bearing a modest surcharge for a health charity. Similarly, the Swiss post office has, since 1913, issued an annual stamp series to support the work of Pro Juventute, a charitable foundation supporting the rights and needs of Swiss children and youth. During World War One considerable postal stationery highlighted the humanitarian work of the Red Cross, using the Red Cross emblem. Stamps released annually between 1914-1918



Figure 1. Australian Tuberculosis Charity Stamps of 1897.

were mainly from Belgium, France and their colonies, and depicted a wide range of subjects. The French 1918 issue showed the sinking of the Charles Roux hospital ship and a bombed hospital (Figure 2).

The first stamps to draw attention to the physical impairments of the war wounded were surcharge stamps issued during and after World War 1. The yield from these stamps between 1914-18 has been estimated at several tens of millions of francs (5). Fund-raising procedures were also adopted in many European and South American countries shortly before the Second World War. Anniversaries of the foundation of the Red Cross were celebrated in some countries. Its 50th anniversary was commemorated by the United States in 1931 with a stamp depicting a nursing hand over the American continent (Figure 3).

All but a few nations featured the emblem of the Red Cross on their stamps, although stamps of Islamic nations showed the Red Crescent, but as they were generally overprinted on earlier issues, they did not carry public health messages (e.g., Liberia and Ethiopia in 1936). Early use of postmarks texting a Red Cross 'Roll Call' endeavoured to foster internationalism (Figure 4), encouraging cooperation and avoiding propaganda - in line with the League of Nations (6).

Post-war years saw a marked increase in stamps issues illustrating positive health and physical training rather than the cure of disease (7). Many issues were portrait stamps commemorating individual doctors (7, 8), with few child welfare issues (Figure 5).

Public health postal representations by WHO during the foundation years 1948-1958

The 1st World Health Assembly (WHA) held in Geneva ratified WHO's Constitution on 7th April 1948, a date marked annually since 1950 as World Health Day (1). The WHA is the decision-making body of WHO and is attended by delegations from all WHO Member States to focus on specific health agendas. Reflecting earlier trends, it addressed the need for postal issues related to WHO activities and agreed health-related aims (9) and charted a preliminary course for WHO and its Member States activities through public health philately. In 1948 the WHO Public Information Office was tasked with helping to achieve its public health mission by presenting and interpreting its activities with 'attractive and popular presentation of material, and to ensure readability and uniformity of style of publications' (10). Philatelic communications

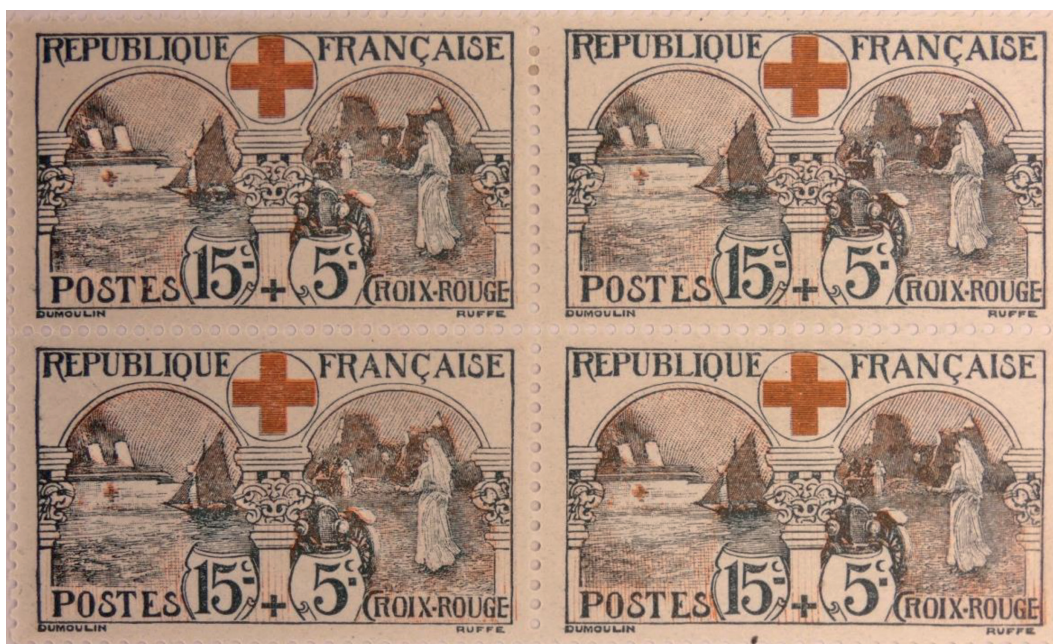


Figure 2. French Red Cross Hospital Stamps of 1918.

were valued as they provided an opportunity to inform a worldwide public about the Organization's work and to promote health in such a format (11). To commemorate WHO's foundation, Switzerland in 1948 was the first country to issue stamps as overprints of earlier Swiss issues released between 1936 and 1949 but with the words 'Organisation Mondiale de la Santé' printed across them. These stamps depicted mainly historical, but not health-related themes. The high value stamps,

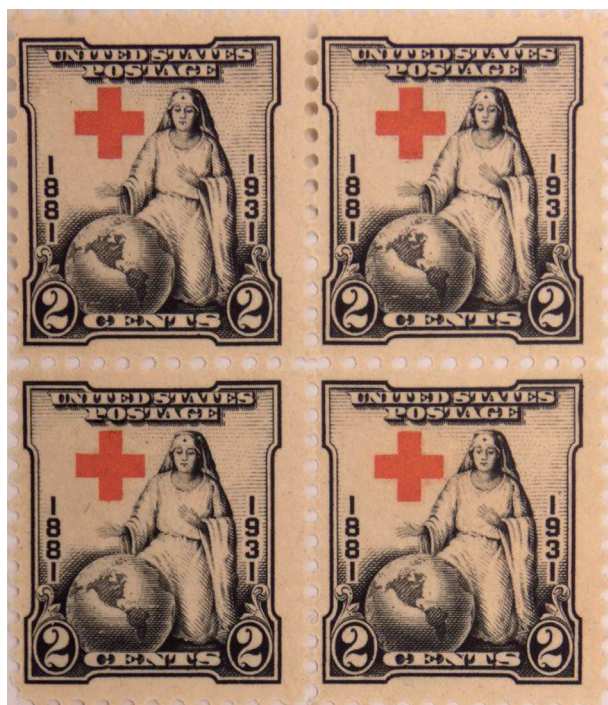


Figure 3. 50th Anniversary of Red Cross Foundation in United States of America.

which had commemorated an agreement between eight towns of the Swiss Confederacy in 1481 symbolized the value of co-operation. In 1949 Austria released a single issue with a picture of a child requesting help to promote the UN Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (Figure 6).

By 1950 WHO activities had grown, but its small budget of a few million dollars secured from Member States was insufficient to undertake its health programme. For this reason, India issued a resolution to the 3rd WHA in 1950 for Member States to raise funds by issuing special World Health Day postage stamps for public purchase, with proceeds to be used by Member States. Nevertheless, it was not until 1955 that India issued a set of stamps which illustrated mosquito control to reduce malaria transmission. Most countries in need of public health interventions were very poor, and fund-raising in this way had a precedent. A UN Day marked the anniversary of the introduction in 1945 of the UN Charter, the year the UN officially came into being (12). In the 1950s twenty-four countries released stamps commemorating either UN days or technical assistance, and fourteen acknowledged the role of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). None of these showed medical themes. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) was highlighted in stamp sets from Honduras in 1953 and Liberian stamps in 1954 featured the UN World Health Conference of 1952. For WHO's 10th Anniversary in 1958 only Taiwan and Belgium issued commemorative postal issues, both without health messages (Tables 1-6). There was a lack of clarity as to how WHO could act to influence Member States.



Figure 4. Red Cross 'Roll Call' postmark of 1923.



Figure 5. Child Growth Monitoring Welfare Airmail Issue of French West Africa in 1942.



Figure 6. Austrian UN Children's Emergency Fund issue in 1949.

Whether medical or health themes should be incorporated into the design of stamps issued by Member States was unclear, although their postal issues could endorse WHO's health-related activities. Messaging

on major issues such as early diagnosis of tuberculosis with mass use of X-rays, adopted internationally in the 1950s, was absent. Nor were postmarks, an additional option for health messaging, utilised. Whether WHO would depart from alternative postal representations by Nation States was unclear. WHO's independence within the UN system was in question, although creation of its own emblem which could be used on all publications and postal issues, suggested its mandate should be specialised. WHO intended this emblem to characterise its role alongside, but distinct from images adopted by Nation States to represent health and disease (13). This evolution became apparent in the following decade.

The WHO Emblem and its postal use by the UN and its Member Nations

The UN had its own postal system within the Universal Postal Union, a specialized agency headquartered in Bern, Switzerland, coordinating postal policies among Member Nations and facilitating a uniform worldwide postal system (14). WHO became potentially more visible when it adopted its own emblem in 1948 although it was not used postally until 1956 in an Iranian stamp, and in an adapted UN version in the same year. The emblem alone was the design for a set from Switzerland in 1957, the 10th WHO commemorative anniversary issue from



Figure 7. Laos 1968 issue highlighting WHO emblem.

Taiwan in 1958, and some later Anniversary issues (Figure 7).

A modified design from Belgium was used in 1958 and a South Korean version in 1959, which showed celebrating children and adults. None of these stamps carried health messages. The caduceus symbol of medical science featured in these stamps show the staff of Aesculapius, the God of healing whose cult involved snakes. The emblem shows a single snake coiled around the staff to symbolize immortality and wisdom (15). This is overlaid on the symbol of a globe, surrounded by a double laurel symbolising peace. The caduceus design adopted by WHO had first been used postally in a 1929 cancer issue from Denmark, and in a modified design in the same year from France in 1929, with two entwined snakes held by another medical deity Mercury (Figure 8). The separate postal representation of WHO, UNICEF, and the Red Cross/Crescent used not dissimilar emblems: a circular design, schematic globes, laurel leaves and variable imaging within the

globe (WHO: caduceus medical symbol; UNICEF: silhouette displaying the mother and child relationship (e.g., Panama in 1971, Figure 8). During the 1962 malaria eradication program the WHO emblem was integrated with mosquito images (e.g. Laos in 1962, Figure 8). In contrast the emblems of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movements frequently circumscribe the globe in postal issues but remain distinctive from the WHO emblem (e.g. Ethiopia in 1988 for its 125th Anniversary, Figure 8). The UN postal administration does not use the WHO Emblem in its stamp designs.

Many countries, however, started to issue stamps utilising this recognisable WHO logo, thereby linking their national medical programs with WHO activities. This ensured a degree of global recognition from early on, even though initially WHO faced stiff competition for human and financial resources from UNICEF, UNESCO, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Food and Agriculture Organization. The politics of the



Figure 8. Postal variations of Caduceus design and global health Emblems.

situation became, in a sense, visual and helped WHO define its role in international development (11). An eye-catching WHO emblem was intended to enhance its visibility, legitimacy and authority with Western donors and served an important public relations role. Measures were taken to safeguard against unauthorized usage of this new identity, but WHO succeeded in encouraging countries to use its emblem, which helped establish WHO as an acknowledged authority on health matters (16). The communication approach required designs to integrate with those used for other publications, posters, photographs and WHO magazines and nurtured more consistency of health messaging. Nevertheless ‘adapted’ versions of the emblem were incorporated into later stamp designs, and it is unclear how WHO safeguarded its application through postal authorities. In 1960 Indonesia released a World Health Day stamp but without the WHO emblem. The issue illustrated anopheline mosquitos, which became an additional symbol for malaria vector control programs (17).

Postage stamps illustrating key WHO activities 1959–1978

The visual outlets of the WHO Newsletter and World Health magazine were the primary outlets through which the organization implemented its visual politics during these years. These covered virtually all aspects related to public health and technical assistance work, allowing it to portray its success and

enhance its authority. The narrative led to the belief that the world was on the verge of a revolutionary improvement in health standards, including the eradication of malaria, and to win the fight against transmissible diseases. These were dramatically visualised in these publications and through postal stationary, production of which was actively promoted (18). To promote technical assistance, the editors of the Newsletter portrayed many pilot projects (over 600 in 1959) as success stories. This was not feasible with stamps, although the promotion of new health campaigns readily lent itself to ‘marketing’ through a vast network of postal stationary.

The WHO approach during this period departed from the earlier designs used during the 1950s or prior to its foundation, adopting targeted messaging primarily on the key health initiatives of malaria and smallpox eradication and child health. Portrait images of well-known public health pioneers were not used as in earlier health stamp designs, except by the UN to commemorate its own Secretary General U Thant. From 1969 to 1973 the WHO magazine World Health published more articles on Europe – portrayed as the locus where technology thrived and research was done, with fewer articles on low-income countries. However, stamps issued in these countries utilised broader imaging to illustrate their own medical problems. The 1968 WHO 20th Anniversary Commemoration issues by Nation States mostly illustrated vaccination and maternal-child portraits, with all showing the WHO Emblem (Tables 1-6). The 25th Anniversary UNICEF



Figure 9. First day Cover showing Eradication du Paludisme overprint on Swiss stamp with WHO emblem and postmark with cover showing special ‘malaria emblem’.

stamp issues in 1971 primarily illustrated only healthy children. These stamp designs extended beyond the boundaries of philately to draw attention to significant world problems and served as a reminder of the UN’s commitment to its goals.

Malaria control and eradication

Malaria and smallpox control campaigns were prioritised by WHO in the 1960s (18). In 1955 the first WHO Global Malaria Eradication campaign had been launched as a worldwide effort to eradicate malaria. In that year, the 8th WHA passed a resolution calling for malaria eradication within five years. The role of WHO was critical in undertaking technical co-ordination of national responses. Postage stamp issues to support malaria control introduced various iconic designs, and WHO eventually produced a ‘malaria emblem’ that figured on many of these stamps and postmarks (Figure 9). WHO’s Executive Board resolved that postage stamps could make a valuable contribution to the dissemination of information related to this initiative and would stimulate interest in the battle against malaria (19). This was especially relevant in poorer countries with lower literacy levels, where an

innovative eye-catching design drew attention. The intention was to build up a ‘world health-consciousness.’

Ninety-one Member States released 4 billion malaria stamps as part of an omnibus release to coincide with World Health Day in April 1962, with many using the proposed WHO ‘malaria emblem,’ for which alternative emblem designs were also prepared by WHO. The use of the malaria emblem was also a means of expressing widespread concerns and solidarity across countries in support of the initiative, and it was often combined in the stamp design with the official WHO Emblem (17). Sixteen countries printed special postmark cancellations. In the United Kingdom a Member of Parliament, Mr. C. Johnson, asked the Postmaster-General what action he has taken, or proposed to take, in response to the appeal of the WHO to support the struggle against malaria by issuing special stamps. No specific stamps were issued by the UK, but the Postmaster authorised a special postmark slogan during August 1962 which was used on some 200 million items of mail (20). Even though dozens of Sub-Saharan African States produced malaria stamp issues in solidarity with the initiative, these countries were largely excluded from WHO co-ordinated malaria control programmes. This anomaly was conspicuous given that the greatest

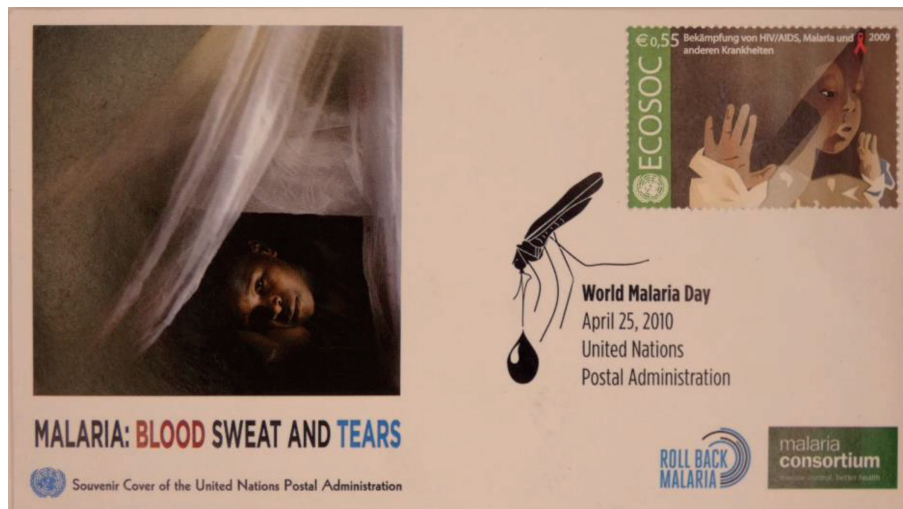


Figure 10. World Malaria Day cover with 2010 UN stamp on prevention of HIV/AIDS, malaria and children's diseases.

problem with malaria existed in sub-Saharan Africa, yet the eradication programme excluded Africa (21). By the late 1960s malaria eradication had become unrealistic, and not surprisingly, this was paralleled by a large decline in the number of malaria postal issues by Member States. After the Global Malaria Eradication Campaign was discontinued in 1969, few Nations released philatelic issues with malaria designs. Since the Spirit of Dakar Call for Action in 1996, which concerned new initiative to control malaria across Africa proposed by the WHO Africa Regional Office and World Bank (22), a resurgence of postage stamp issues occurred, largely tracking global malaria control initiatives between 1996 and 2020. These releases were not co-ordinated by WHO as before, were more commercialised and targeted stamp collectors, especially with attractive miniature sheets. The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the principal organ to coordinate economic, social, and related work of the 14 UN specialized agencies, issued in 2009 a special stamp highlighting the importance of prioritising malaria as well as children's diseases (Figure 10).

Smallpox eradication

Perceptions of the feasibility of the eradication of another endemic disease, smallpox, changed in the

1960s as technical collaboration between Member States allowed more possibilities for smallpox vaccine development and administration. A new freeze-dried vaccine remained heat stable for several weeks and could be delivered by intradermal jet injector, which enabled its use by health workers in rural areas. WHO priorities had shifted from malaria to smallpox eradication, as this was achievable with the availability of the freeze-dried vaccine combined with rapid clinical diagnosis of cases to identify affected regions (23). In 1965 the WHA approved a resolution establishing smallpox eradication as a major WHO goal. Global eradication was confirmed in May 1980 by the 33rd WHA. Unlike the malaria eradication campaign, the smallpox eradication programme was accompanied by very few postal issues, and WHO did not promote omnibus releases by Nation States (24). Failure of the WHO malaria eradication program may have blunted adoption of a proportional philatelic initiative with smallpox. Following eventual smallpox eradication in 1978 (30th WHO Anniversary), celebratory stamp issues were released by several Member States, only some of which used the WHO emblem (Senegal, Lesotho, Egypt, Nigeria). In 1978 the UN postal agency also released a special issue, and again in 2018 to commemorate the 40th Anniversary of smallpox eradication (Figure 11).



Figure 11. 2018 UN cover celebrating 40th anniversary of smallpox eradication.

Child health, nutrition and vaccination

As alternative visual means of targeting communication and improved funding became available, with the 25th Anniversary of WHO's foundation in 1973, and further stamp issues were released featuring other key health programmes (Tables 1-7) (25). These included childhood vaccination to several infections following simplified vaccination schedules, and topics, such as malnutrition and attendance at children's clinics for growth monitoring. Many stamp issues showed the WHO emblem in their design (Figure 12).

In contrast to issues in the pre-foundation years before 1948, tuberculosis diagnosis and management received little priority with few issues designed to address this problem. Other specific diseases were not highlighted with philatelic issues during this period (e.g., leprosy, cancer, heart disease, smoking, sexually transmitted diseases, mental health, neglected parasitic infections). The greatest emphasis was on infections associated with child mortality and the need for international health action and wider public representation rather than a focus on specific diseases. Health slogans in WHO postmarks were rarely used, nor illustrations of diseases of children (26).

Inauguration of WHO Geneva headquarters in 1966

Until the establishment of its permanent Geneva headquarters, WHO had operated from an enlarged

section of the Palais de Nations, the home of the former League of Nations. The modern design of its new Geneva building by the Swiss architect Jean Tschumi (1904–1962) created an innovative statement. Tschumi had made initial architectural drawings using a framework based on the proportions and dimensions of a postage stamp. He followed the philosophy of French designer Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann (1879–1933) who promoted this design principle to ensure fine craftsmanship (27). The building design was subsequently reflected in philately, as in 1966, sixty-seven countries, as well as the UN, recognised the inauguration of WHO headquarters with special stamp issues illustrating only the building (Tables 1–6 for country listings). This is the largest omnibus philatelic release ever to be issued depicting only a single building (Figure 13).

WHO established formal regional offices in six areas: Africa, the Americas, Eastern Mediterranean; Europe; South-East Asia, and the Western Pacific (1). Of these Regions, the last formed was the one in Africa (AFRO) (1). Even countries in Central and Northern Africa such as Zanzibar and Spanish Morocco, were assigned to the European Region. In contrast to central headquarters, only three African States issued commemorative stamps of their regional buildings (Gabon, Liberia, and Tchad). The imbalance of numerous less developed countries issuing multiple stamps commemorating only the Geneva building, and almost none showing the regional buildings,

Table 1. Anniversary Issues by Country for WHO African Region 1948-1988.

Country	Building Inauguration	Anniversary Year			
	1966	10 th 1958	20 th 1968	25 th 1973	40 th 1988
Algeria	2	-	1	-	-
Benin	-	-	-	-	1
Burkina Faso/Upper Volta	1	-	2	1	2
Burundi	-	-	3 (1969)	-	1 (1989)
Cameroun	1	-	-	1	-
Central African Republic	1	-	1	1 (1974)	2
Chad	2 (1966) 1 (1967)	-	2	-	-
Comoros	-	-	1	-	-
Congo (Brazzaville)	1	-	1	2	2 (1989)
Congo (Kinshasa)	4	-	-	-	-
Dahomey	2	-	2	2	-
Ethiopia	2	-	2	-	3
French Equatorial Africa	-	1	-	-	-
Gabon	1	-	1	-	-
Ghana	4	-	4	5	-
Republic of Guinée	4 (1967)	-	-	7	4
Ivory Coast	-	-	1	-	-
Kenya	-	-	-	-	4
Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika	-	-	4	-	-
Lesotho	-	-	2	1	-
Liberia	2 (1967)	-	-	6	-
Malagasy	-	-	1	-	1
Mali	2	-	1	-	1
Mauritania	-	-	1	-	4
Mauritius	-	-	-	1	4
Mozambique	-	-	-	-	1
Niger	-	-	1	1	2
Nigeria	-	-	2	-	3
Rwanda	3	-	-	-	-
Senegal	-	-	2	-	-
Seychelles	2	-	-	-	-
Swaziland	-	-	-	2	-
Togo	7	-	6	2	2
Uganda	-	-	-	-	6
Zambia	2	-	1	4	-

Numbers refer to the number of stamps in the country issue for that Anniversary year. Twelve countries not listed issued no Anniversary WHO stamps in these years. Dash: no stamp issue released; brackets indicate year released if different from Anniversary year.

Table 2. Anniversary Issues by Country for American region 1948-1988.

Country	Building Inauguration	Anniversary Year			
	1966	10 th 1958	20 th 1968	25 th 1973	40 th 1988
Antigua	2	-	-	-	-
Argentina	1	-	1	-	-
Ascension	2	-	-	-	-
Bahamas	2	-	-	-	-
Brazil	-	-	1	-	-
Cayman Islands	2	-	-	-	-
Cuba	3	-	2	1	-
Dominica	2	-	4 (1969)	7	-
Dominican Republic	2	-	-	-	-
El Salvador	2	-	2	-	-
Grenada	2	-	4	9	-
Guyana	-	-	-	-	2
Jamaica	-	-	3 (1969)	-	-
Mexico	-	-	-	-	2
Montserrat	2	-	-	-	-
Peru	-	-	2 (1969)	-	-
St Helena	2	-	-	-	-
St Kitts Nevis Anguilla	2	-	-	-	-
Saint Lucia	2	-	-	-	-
Saint Pierre Miquelon	-	-	1	-	-
Saint Vincent	2	-	-	-	-
Suriname	-	-	2	-	-
Trinidad and Tobago	-	-	3	-	-
Tristan da Cunha	2	-	-	-	-

Numbers refer to the number of stamps in the country issue for that Anniversary year.

Eleven countries not listed issued no Anniversary WHO stamps in these years.

Dash: no stamp issue released; brackets indicate year released if different from Anniversary year.

created a sense of world health being directed from a first world setting. These stamps portrayed an administrative structure centred on Geneva at a time when more countries were becoming politically independent and challenging their historical masters (28). The central administrative building of WHO in Geneva was projected as an orderly, tranquil, and purposeful centre where international matters were resolved and a healthier future mapped out.

A few regional activities were represented postally. A special stamp was issued by Denmark in 1960

to commemorate the 10th WHO European Regional Meeting, which showed a breastfeeding mother. Denmark also issued a 1972 stamp to commemorate the inauguration of the WHO Regional building in Copenhagen (29).

Commemorative Anniversary postal issues 1968-2023

The 20th, 25th and 40th Anniversaries since WHO's foundation corresponded to two decades of technical development accompanied by transitions in

Table 3. Anniversary Stamp Issues by country for WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Country	Building Inauguration	Anniversary Year			
	1966	10 th 1958	20 th 1968	25 th 1973	40 th 1988
Bahrain	-	-	3	-	2
Egypt	3	-	2	1	1
French Antarctic Territories	-	-	1	-	-
Iran	1	1 (1956)	1	1	-
Iraq	-	-	4	-	4
Jordan	2 (1967)	-	2	-	2
Kuwait	2	-	2	-	3
Lebanon	3	-	-	-	-
Libya	3	-	2	-	-
Morocco	2	-	2	1	-
Oman	-	-	-	-	1
Pakistan	-	-	2	-	1
Qatar	-	-	6	1 (1972)	2
Saudi Arabia	3	-	1 (1969)	-	2
Somaliland	-	-	3	-	2
Sudan	3	-	-	-	-
Syria	1	-	3	2	1
Tunisia	-	-	2	-	-
Yemen	6	-	-	3 (1972)	-
Yemen Democratic Republic	-	-	-	3	4

Numbers refer to the number of stamps in the country issue for that Anniversary year.

All countries issued Anniversary issues for this Region. Dash indicates no stamp issue released; brackets indicate year released if different from Anniversary year.

international public health policy and health delivery. Events and shifts in WHO strategies were frequently captured in Anniversary philatelic issues by Member States. Tables 1 to 7 tabulate across the six WHO regions the number of commemorative stamps issued by 132 countries corresponding to these Anniversary dates. The Eastern Mediterranean and African States released the most issues (Tables 1 and 3), with far fewer from Europe and America (Tables 2 and 4). For the 20th Anniversary, the WHO emblem alone was illustrated in some stamps (e.g., Laos), while others employed a variety of striking images. For example, man's ability to control health (Mauritania), or aid to the sick (Upper Volta), children (Lesotho), provision of hope represented as flowers and sunshine (St Pierre

et Miquelon), or dramatically, Rembrandt's picture of the anatomical dissection of the skull, which was contrasted with Raphael's portrait of Christ healing the sick (Togo). There was a wide range of alternative themes adopted, including mythical Gods (Greece: goddess Hygeia), national flags (Brazil, Ghana), doctors (Somalia, Tunisia), expressive hands (Libya), nurses (Fiji, Morocco, Gibraltar), Arab physicians (Syria), various child images (Argentina, Senegal, Zambia), surgery (Ghana), a Head of State (Brunei), or vaccination, (Albania, Cuba, and Kenya). Prior to the launch of the WHO Expanded Program for Immunisation in 1974 there was little emphasis on immunisation. This multiplicity of themes signalled a shift from the more uniform traditional designs of the

Table 4. Anniversary Issues by country for WHO European Region 1948-1988.

Country	Building Inauguration	Anniversary Year			
	1966	10 th 1958	20 th 1968	25 th 1973	40 th 1988
Albania	4	-	3	-	2
Belgium	-	1	-	1	-
Czechoslovakia	1	-	1	-	-
Cyprus	-	-	1	-	1
Denmark	-	1 (1960)	-	1 (1972)	1
Finland	-	-	1	-	-
East Germany	1	-	-	-	1
Gibraltar	2	-	2	-	-
Greece	1	-	1	-	-
Hungary	1	-	-	1	-
Iceland	-	-	-	-	1
Luxembourg	1	-	-	-	-
Malta	-	-	-	1	1
Monaco	2	-	1	-	1
Poland	-	-	-	-	1
Portugal	-	-	3	-	-
Romania	-	-	1	-	-
Russia	-	-	-	-	1
Switzerland	-	5 sets	-	5 (1975)	-
Turkey	-	-	1	-	-

Numbers refer to the number of stamps in the country issue for that Anniversary year. Twenty-three countries not listed issued no Anniversary WHO stamps in these years. Dash indicates no stamp issue released; brackets indicate year released if different from Anniversary year.

Table 5. Anniversary Issues by Country for WHO South-East Asia Region 1948-1988.

Country	Building Inauguration	Anniversary Year			
	1966	10 th 1958	20 th 1968	25 th 1973	40 th 1988
Bhutan	-	-	-	-	-
Indonesia	-	-	2	1	-
Maldiv Islands	-	-	4	-	2
Nepal	1	-	1	1	-
Sri Lanka-Ceylon	2	-	1	-	1
Thailand	-	-	1	1	-

Numbers refer to the number of stamps for that Anniversary date for each country issue. Five countries not listed issued no Anniversary WHO stamps in these years. Dash: no stamp issue released

Table 6. Anniversary Issues by country for WHO Western Pacific Region 1948-1988.

Country	Building Inauguration	Anniversary Year			
	1966	10 th 1958	20 th 1968	25 th 1973	40 th 1988
Australia	-	-	-	1	-
Brunei	2	-	3	-	3
Cambodia	3	-	2	-	-
China People's Republic	-	-	-	-	1
China Taiwan	-	3	2	-	-
Fiji	2	-	3	-	-
French Polynesia	-	-	2	-	-
Gilbert and Ellis Islands	2	-	-	-	-
Hong Kong	2	-	-	-	-
South Korea	2	1 (1959)*	2	-	-
Laos	3	-	5	-	3
Macau	-	-	-	-	3
Malaysia	-	-	-	2	-
Mongolia	2	-	2	-	-
New Caledonia	-	-	1	-	1
New Hebrides	2	-	-	-	-
Pitcairn Islands	2	-	2	-	-
Samoa	4	-	-	4	-
Solomon Islands	2	-	-	-	-
Tuvulu	-	-	-	-	-
South Vietnam	3	-	1	2	-
Wallis and Fortuna	1	-	-	-	-

Numbers refer to number of stamps in the country issue for that Anniversary year. Five countries not listed issued no Anniversary WHO stamps in these years. Dash: no stamp issued; brackets: year released if different from Anniversary year. *South Korea also issued a 15th Anniversary stamp in 1964.

past to more politically aware health themes, although their selection still reflected WHO's strategic influence (30, 31). Population growth concerned national health programs of Member States in the 1960s. The fear that reduced mortality arising from better disease control would lead to increased population size led to much greater emphasis on family planning. The WHA in 1968 had recognised the importance of contraception but it was, for many reasons, a controversial topic. Family planning initially received tepid support from WHO but by 1975 it was providing technical assistance to over sixty countries (32). Twentieth Anniversary stamp issues however, ignored this thorny

issue with only one release from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania which showed a small nuclear one child African family (Figure 14).

The theme adopted for World Health Day in 1973 (25th WHO Anniversary) was 'Health Begins at Home.' It was conveyed in a commemorative set from Zambia on 'clinics at your service' at a time when provision of community services and primary health care, rather than hospital care, became a priority. A new collaboration was forged in 1978 between WHO and UNICEF to provide basic health services, and primary health care programmes were endorsed by the 28th WHA. An international conference on primary

Table 7. Anniversary Issues by country for all WHO regions (194 States) and UN from 1998 to 2023.

Country	Anniversary Year			
	50 th 1998	65 th 2013	70 th 2018	75 th 2023
Bahrain	3	-	-	-
Bhutan	2	-	-	-
Cameroun	1	-	-	-
Central African Republic	-	-	5	-
China People's Republic	1	-	-	-
China Taiwan	1	-	-	-
Colombia	1	-	-	-
Guiné-Bissau	-	-	-	1
Indonesia	-	-	-	-
Mauritius	-	-	-	1
Mexico	-	-	-	1
Sierra Leone	-	-	5	5 (2024)
Sri Lanka	1	1 (2012)	-	1
Switzerland	1 (1995)	-	-	-
Tuvulu	-	6	-	-
United Nations	4 (1993:45th)	-	6	1

health care held at Alma Ata in Kazakhstan was commemorated in a Ugandan stamp and miniature sheet with a photographic image of the conference (Figure 15) (33).

WHO and UNICEF had built up a sizeable collection of relatable and emotional photographs of mothers with children. Photography was considered a useful tool to change widely held assumptions and to influence community action. It provided a visual vocabulary of 'hunger' and 'need' which generated support and donations (34). Designs in postal stationary also captured these images and were used by WHO to help overcome challenges in implementing community-centred approaches, and primary health care more generally (35). Despite the great hopes surrounding the Alma-Ata vision of 'Health for All', its vision of implementation was complex (36). The 'Health for All' caption did, however, re-emerge in the 2023 75th Commemorative Anniversary stamps from Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Mexico and the UN Postal Agency. There were fewer Anniversary stamps in 1973 from all WHO regions than in 1968 (20th anniversary), (Tables 1-7). Some countries had, in the previous year, issued

25th Anniversary stamps commemorating UNICEF rather than WHO. Mexico did embrace WHO's Anniversary with a stamp issue celebrating Rodolfo Robles (1878-1939), the doctor who first described onchocerciasis in Latin America. Switzerland released a new issue of five large stamps depicting the WHO emblem in 1975, but with no health message. There were very few commemorative stamps for the 30th Anniversary (1978). WHO's image had become an issue of importance in the late 1970s and 1980s, with greater questioning of the WHO's role, authority, and capabilities, especially when it experienced financial instability with failure of some countries to pay their contributions. In the decades that followed many new health drives were launched, such as the 1985 Universal Childhood Immunisation Initiative promoted by WHO and UNICEF, which led to the 1988 goal to eradicate poliomyelitis and improve vaccine coverage for several childhood infectious diseases. By 1988, the 40th Anniversary, attention to selected tropical diseases, child survival, reproductive health, tobacco control and cancer had so evolved that, by the mid-1990s, a broader global health programme had emerged. Yet



Figure 12. Ghana stamp of 1973 (25th Anniversary) featuring WHO's emblem with immunisation and nutritional messaging.

many 40th Anniversary stamp issues, mostly from the African and Eastern Mediterranean Regions (Tables 1 and 3) still figured the WHO emblem, with Mauritania illustrating a schematic figure of a child waving a flag with a small WHO logo. Anniversary issues between 1998 and 2018 declined for all WHO regions except South-East Asia. This is illustrated in Figure 16 in terms of the percentage of UN Member States releasing an Anniversary issue. Only nine countries

produced issues for the 50th Anniversary (Table 7). The increasing multilateral nature of global health and alternative international donor structures re-focused national agendas and qualified the role played by WHO. Its publications were often jointly published with other organisations. WHO had to share leadership in international health with bilateral agencies on issues such as AIDS, vaccine and drug development, neglected tropical diseases, safe motherhood, and tuberculosis and malaria control. The philatelic response by Member States postal institutions was to switch emphasis from WHO to commemorating World Health Days, UNICEF campaigns or National programs, such as those on HIV prevention and lung disease (37, 38). In 2018 (70th Anniversary) six stamps were issued on World Health Day by the UN postal agency promoting universal health coverage, meaning that all people should have access to the health services they need. Only two further countries released stamp issues for this Anniversary (Table 7).

Postal communications for Annual WHO World Health Day themes

There have been 75 World Health Day themes promoted by WHO since 1950. These are utilised to advertise either general or specific health messages. Most themes addressed general preventive health measures with specific messaging only for diabetes (x2), poliomyelitis, cancer, smallpox (x2), malaria, smoking, heart disease and hypertension. Member States have used a wide variety of stamp designs for these themes, with many having no clear association with WHO and the number of States issuing stamps annually has varied. Themes for Anniversary years focused on 'Health for all: 10th (1958) 'Ten years of health progress,' 20th (1968) 'Health in the world of tomorrow,' 25th (1973) 'Health begins at home,' 40th (1988) 'Health for all: all for health,' 50th (1998) 'Safe motherhood: pregnancy is special – let's make it safe,' 65th (2013) 'High blood pressure – hypertension,' 70th (2018) 'Universal health coverage – everyone, everywhere,' 75th (2023) 'Health for all.' World Health Days commenced in April 1950, the month WHO was founded. World Health Day stamps were only released ten years later to promote 'the World United Against Malaria' campaign.



Figure 13. Ghana issue commemorating the 1966 inauguration of WHO Headquarters building in Geneva.



Figure 14. Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania 20th Anniversary issue showing a one child family.

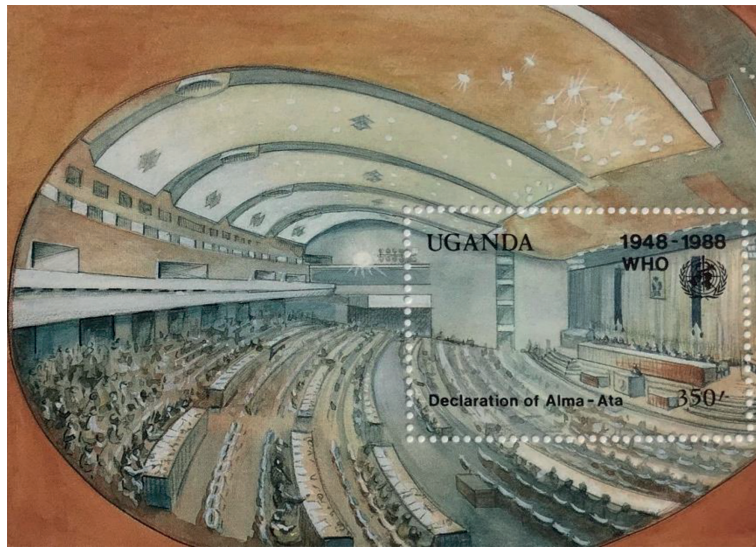


Figure 15. WHO 40th Anniversary Ugandan stamp sheet celebrating the Alma Ata Conference.

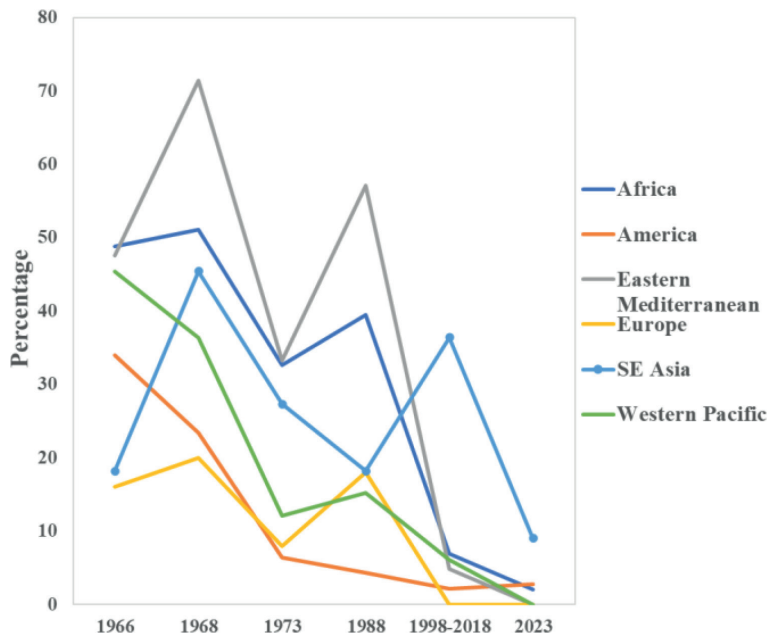


Figure 16. Percentage of countries with Anniversary issues between 1966 and 2023 for UN States of the six WHO regions.

Subsequently many countries issued stamps annually in April adopting the WHO specific health theme for that particular year. While a WHO emblem might be present its inclusion was, and remains, inconsistent. For example, for the 1972 theme of ‘Your Heart is

your Health,’ over forty Member States issued stamps: Cameroun illustrated the circulatory system in an air mail issue without an emblem, while in contrast a Belgian stamp showed a WHO emblem transplanted over a heart (Figure 17).’ The UN stamp for World Health



Figure 17. WHO 25th Anniversary stamps showing 'Your Heart is Your Health' in Cameroon, and Belgian issue with heart replaced by transplanted WHO Emblem.

Day 1972 showed Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian man without reference to that year's health theme.

Mandated Global Public Health days are designated as official World campaigns and have featured: tuberculosis, Chagas disease, blood donation, antimicrobial awareness, immunization, malaria, tobacco, hepatitis, patient safety, AIDS, neglected tropical diseases, health and care workers and the health of the planet (39). Stamps frequently are issued by Member States to coincide with these days. For example, on World TB Day stamps were used to honour Robert Koch (1843-1910), the discoverer of the tubercle bacillus in 1882, or highlighted prevention of HIV which carries increased risk of co-infection with tuberculosis (37). Selected World Health Day themes work in ways akin to advertising, aiming to present key images on a critical day, at the right time, by many actors. Choice of theme is a political decision

as information and communication technologies have to be leveraged. Newsletters, e-mail messages, health information websites, and surveillance platforms come into play. Although philatelic channels could potentially provide equivalent coverage for health messages, postal communication and stamps are increasingly neglected. UNICEF did endeavor to provide breastfeeding education through persuasive imaging, including stamp design. This decline has happened even when communities are engaged (40). In 1990, Australia issued four stamps designed by children with the message 'prevention is better than cure, and the United Kingdom similarly held a competition involving children in the design of the 2022 COVID stamps which received 600,000 entries. Significantly neither issue incorporated a WHO Emblem and indeed, neither country has ever incorporated a WHO Emblem into a stamp issue.

Evidence for raising health awareness and knowledge translation

Evidence suggests that raising health awareness by WHO was able to build its reputation in public health by illustrating its goals and achievements, not just in technical documents, but visually through photography and art, including postal stationery. Whether this translated into raised health awareness is more difficult to substantiate, as the latter stems from perceived relevance and awareness of solutions. While images can be powerful tools, the evidence that philatelic communication can help people adopt positive health behaviours and create demand for preventive and curative services is very limited. Health-related postage stamps are considered health promotion tools mostly on the basis that they are directly purchased by the public, transmitted between correspondents and are a form of mass communication in real time (41, 42), especially in poorer communities in rural areas (43). Visualisation is a 'push' mechanism, by which the image producer presents health information in a format to improve understandability. Lessons from communication experiences for improving child survival (44) led to their being used in postal images. Postage stamps provided one part of a multifaceted and multidisciplinary communication strategy, so their discrete contribution is difficult to discern. WHO had a reasonably good idea of whom it wanted to target but could not predict the presence or size of the audience reached, either nationally or internationally. Yet a range of communication strategies, combined with philatelic efforts, in initiatives such as 'A World without Polio,' and 'Malaria Elimination,' cannot be underrated. Not least stamps portrayed a human face: that of the expert, the nurse, the international health worker, the doctor and the recipient of aid. The intention, if it could be achieved, was also to generate understanding and empathy from users, to inspire further action and essentially to approve what WHO was doing. Importantly, postal imaging was not specifically listed as a formal part of the WHO Strategic Communications Framework for developing and evaluating communication strategies to support informed decisions and practice based on evidence (45). The stamp themes of individual Nation States are each adopted

after review by its NPA. Individual designers were employed, and many would be accomplished professional artists. Drawn or painted drafts were frequently used until current photomontage techniques became available. For many issues designers are not known. Careful examination of these stamps has revealed few technical-related 'errors,' which would invalidate the accuracy or meaning of the stamp designs reviewed.

Discussion

This analysis provides the first synopsis of public health messages delivered through WHO postal stationery and Anniversary issues released by its Member States and NPAs. Commemorative stamps celebrated memorable events and medical themes but WHO operated in a political context of multiple partners. Apart from ensuring the acceptability of postal images to these partners, WHO had to take account of sensitivities between pre-colonial countries and international organisations. Yet in the final instance, Member States, not WHO, decided whether to issue sets of stamps, and as seen from Tables 1 - 7 some regions issued very few stamps. This went some way to fostering a democratic process in defining health priorities although, even though participation is voluntary, stamp health themes were often selected only for WHO priorities. Perhaps this was one of the reasons that so many African countries produced stamps on malaria elimination at a time when they were excluded from these control programmes. The important political message that people have a human right to health and freedom from disease has been fundamental to WHO's mission. Such an aspiration was evident in the World Health Day theme issues related to 'Our Planet, Our Health.' They are one of the few means globally available for WHO to provide a visual image of its objectives and aspirations for solidarity in health to the public. The semiotics of postage stamps are politically very important (46). Their design mandates inclusion of only the most important symbols and images. For Member States, what is portrayed must represent a country's heritage and aspirations, to its citizens and the wider world (47, 48). The danger is that when a global initiative fails, as was

the case with the 1962 Malaria Eradication Program, it potentially blunts motivations to invest in postal stationery for health messaging. Undoubtedly one of the greatest successes in WHO's postal history has been the adoption of its iconic WHO emblem by many Anniversary and World Health Day stamp issues, and by more than one hundred Member States since WHO's foundation. The emblem bolstered its mandate for public health and cemented its identity as a trusted source of information. It enabled WHO to distinguish itself from colonial powers and colonial medical structures while its regional structure facilitated country-specific designs and communications in response to changing audiences and needs. Communication strategies are best designed at country level and WHO played a role in supporting this. Yet, several countries never issued any health-related stamp using the WHO emblem, or text related to WHO, including South Africa, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, France, Chile, Ecuador, the Chinese People's Republic and New Zealand, the latter being a country which has issued annually large numbers of national health stamps since 1929. Since 1998 there have been far fewer Anniversary issues across all WHO Regions, except for South-East Asia, which has the smallest number of Member States (Table 7, Figure 16). This follows on from the increasing role of other organisations funding global health

(49). Resources, such as the photographic images officially commissioned by WHO, were not made available for postal use by the UN (16, 35), and images produced by NPAs of Member States are independently commissioned and open to broader visual and artistic representation. Modern printing techniques have enabled production of saleable, highly artistic designs, and at present the economic value of sales to stamps collectors may be regarded by some States as more beneficial than their health benefits. Special stamp issues now cover a multiplicity of topics, and such postal revenues benefit national governments. In contrast revenue from dedicated charity stamps has greatly declined.

The emergence of pandemic infections such as COVID, and greater world-wide recognition of non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, has demanded international public health cooperation. Wider use of the WHO emblem by postal administrations, which has declined in recent years, could assist cooperation between countries and donor agencies as WHO remains a trusted source of information. That these agencies still value a role for stamps was reflected by the UN Secretary-General in July 2020, through a video message launching UN postage stamps to support the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund. The WHO emblem was small and confined to the edge of the miniature sheet (Figure 18). Many States have also



Figure 18. UN We are all in this together: Help stop the spread of COVID 19.

issued COVID related stamps in response to the pandemic (38), but modes of health messaging have greatly expanded, and some countries may prefer alternatives. The issuing and promotion of stamps is no longer seminal to the identity of WHO as an institution. Of WHO Member States just five countries (Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Mexico, Sierra Leone, Guiné-Bissau) and the UN issued commemorative stamps for its 75th Anniversary in 2023. Three of these and the UN used a multi-coloured female figurative design, with the slogan 'Health for All', described by the UN as a collectible (50). It purports to be a visual lasting tribute to the WHO and its commitment to global health over the last 75 years as well as addressing the global health challenges ahead.

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