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9/28/76

To the Chiefs and All People in Utirik Atoll

Your letter to Mr. Roger Ray, dated July 1976, has been received by this office. We wish to thank you for sending this letter and bringing your views to our attention. We have carefully considered your views, as presented in your letter, and we appreciate the opportunity to answer your thoughtful questions.

Even today, there are many facts about radiation that are not known, despite the large number of scientists that have studied this subject for the past 20 or 30 years. Even less was known about radiation in 1954 at the time of the exposure of the people on Rongelap and Utirik. Based on all available knowledge on radiation at that time, and using the best possible judgment, the American doctors determined that the people of Utirik were exposed only to a small amount of radiation. Hence, there was general agreement among the doctors that the Utirik people would not, in the future, show any diseases caused by radiation. Also, since they had shown little or no effects of their exposure, the Utirik people were returned to this island. Rongelap, however, was more heavily contaminated with radioactivity so the people of this island had to live elsewhere for about three years before they could return to their homes.

In reviewing the data that indicates that the Utirik people were exposed to considerably less radiation than the people of Rongelap, one must conclude that the dose estimates are essentially correct. This conclusion is based not only on the actual dose estimates from measurements on the island. Even more important is that the Utirik people showed only very minor, if any, symptoms of early disease

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from exposure, indicating that the exposure must have been considerably less than was seen on Rongelap island.

Following the return to the island, it was decided that regular medical examinations of the exposed people of Utirik were to be done. Such examinations conducted at regular intervals were conducted to assure that they had not been harmed. Examinations were done in 1957, 1959, 1963, 1969, 1972 and 1975. In addition to complete physical examinations, thyroid examinations and sick calls were held every year. Also, in recent years there have been doctors visits to Utirik every three months.

In conducting these medical examinations, a control group was selected so that the doctors could compare exposed and non-exposed people. This control group consists of unexposed people from Rongelap. This group is considered quite adequate for comparison with the exposed people of both Rongelap and Utirik. The slight genetic difference between the two populations was not considered a sufficient reason to select a separate control group for Utirik.

One of your questions concerned the fact that the children of the exposed islanders have not been included in the regular examination list. This was done because large groups of children of exposed parents have been studied elsewhere. Since none of these studies revealed any distinct genetic effects, it was felt that such a study of the children on Utirik was not necessary. Of course, children are examined and treated as needed at sick calls whenever the doctors visit Utirik.

As stated earlier in this letter, many facts about radiation were not known back in 1954 but the best medical judgment was used in decisions affecting the people of Utirik. Studying the same problems now, with the knowledge we have today, it appears that the doctors at that time were not aware of the degree of exposure of the thyroid due to fallout. This was especially true of the children because their thyroid is much smaller. So it is not surprising that thyroid disease was not expected in the Utirik people. Even more important is that only very recently has information become available from several sources that the thyroid gland, especially in children, is considerably more sensitive to the induction of ~~radiation-induced~~ ^{by radiation} tumors than was anticipated in the past. Taking these factors together, we can now, many years later, explain the incidence of malignant thyroid glands in the Utirik people. At this time it is impossible to predict whether more cases are to be expected in the exposed members of this population. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that the regular medical examinations be continued in the future. By having regular medical examinations, signs of thyroid disease can be detected early and prompt treatment will avoid unnecessary suffering on the part of the Utirik people.

For these reasons, I believe it is of great importance that the Chiefs of Utirik explain to their people the significance of the regular medical examinations.

Conducting the medical examinations and treating people of the islands whenever necessary has been largely in the hands of Drs. Conard, Knudsen and ^{during the past year Dr.} Kotrady. On many occasions, the best medical advice was invited from outstanding specialists in the field, many of whom participated in the actual medical examinations. We believe Drs. Conard/^{Kotrady}and Knudsen to be very capable and conscientious doctors who are deeply committed to the health and welfare of the people of Utirik. Moreover, the report by the special committee on Rongelap and Utirik, which was formed by the Congress of Micronesia, was generally favorable with regard to the examinations. In view of the above, we were greatly surprised to learn about the apparent displeasure on the part of the people of Utirik as expressed in your letter. One possible explanation for this difference in sentiment with regard to Drs. Conard and Knudsen as expressed in your letter could possibly be a misunderstanding as to their role and reasons to come to the islands. I would like to repeat that it is my firm conviction that the principal concern of Drs. Conard and Knudsen is the welfare and well-being of the Utirik people. It is possible that such a misunderstanding could easily result because of the difference in language. Again, I would appeal the Chiefs of Utirik to impress upon their people the importance of the medical examinations and the necessity to trust and cooperate with the American doctors. Only then can you and I be assured of good medical care for the people of Utirik.