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REFER:

MEDICAL DEPARTMENT

August 26, 1969

The Honorable Edward E. Johnston
High Commissioner
Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands
Saipan, Mariana Islands 96950

Dear Mr. Johnson:

I would like to let you know that four Rongelap and one Utirik patient with thyroid abnormalities, accompanied by Dr. Ezra Riklon just arrived at Brookhaven National Laboratory for extensive examinations and evaluation for possible surgery.

Since you may not be acquainted yet with the special medical examinations of the Rongelap people I thought I would outline briefly the nature of these surveys. As you know the Marshallese people of Rongelap and Utirik islands were accidentally exposed to significant amounts of radioactive fallout in 1954. In view of the special radiological aspects of the exposure the Atomic Energy Commission was given the responsibility for these special examinations. Because of my training in human radiation effects I was requested by the AEC to conduct annual medical examinations of these people and have been doing so for the past 15 years. These surveys have been carried out jointly by medical specialists from the United States and Trust Territory medical personnel.

This unfortunate accident resulted in serious effects in the exposed people such as acute depression of their blood cells, skin burns and loss of hair. Fortunately no deaths occurred from the exposure and these early effects were largely recovered from by the end of the first year. However, some rather serious late effects developed. In the past five years thyroid abnormalities have occurred in 17 of 19 children exposed at less than 10 years of age and also in 4 adults. Fifteen of these people have had surgery of the thyroid gland. Only one case proved to be malignant. These cases are in addition to the 5 patients who have just arrived, referred to above. Another serious effect has been slight retardation of growth and development in some of the children as a result of the thyroid injuries. I am happy to report, however that there has been a substantial improvement in growth and development in these children due to the special thyroid medication we have been giving all of the exposed people. We hope to prevent the development of further cancer. Our knowledge of late effects of radiation in human beings is very limited. Therefore continued examinations of these people

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at regular intervals are necessary not only to follow the course of thyroid abnormalities but to detect other effects should they develop. I have been most grateful for the splendid support of personnel of the Trust Territory and the Department of Interior in carrying out these surveys. Doctors William Peck, Al Hicking, John Iaman, Isaac Lanwi, and Dwight Heine, former DISTAD of the Marshalls will be glad I am sure to fill you in on any other further details about the survey.

In the past year or so one and possibly more influential Marshallese have accused us of using the Marshallese people as "guinea pigs". These accusations are of course untrue and it is beyond my comprehension how these people could misconstrue the importance of these examinations which are of such benefit to the Rongelap people. At one time, some years ago, the Rongelap people were skeptical about the need for the exams but in recent years they have been much more understanding and most cooperative and friendly, welcoming us cordially to the island each year.

I would like to also bring up the subject of the added responsibility assigned us in regard to checking the Bikini people on their return. As a member of the Ad Hoc Committee recommending their return I would like to point out that the intent of these examinations was purely precautionary (along with other measures). We frankly do not expect any significant level of internal radiation to accumulate in these people, and the examinations were felt necessary merely to serve as a check. When I visited Kili last year I tried to explain to the Bikini people (perhaps unsuccessfully) several points in regard to the examinations: First, that Bikini was entirely safe for their return, and secondly, that the purpose of the examinations was just to serve as a safety check; that they would not be subjected to medical examinations, only collection of urine samples and the examinations would consist only of lying under a radiation detection device for a period of about 15 minutes; that no blood test or usual medical examinations would be done. If, as Mr. William Bonnet, AEC representative in Honolulu, pointed out to me, the Bikini people were unreasonable in their rental demands, I suggested to him that we delay this problem since I understand it may be several years before any substantial numbers of Bikini people are living on the island. We might even consider using the dispensary or setting up a tent for the examinations since only two or three days are required every year or so to carry them out.

Your continued cooperation in carrying out these surveys will be greatly appreciated. I hope that I will have an opportunity before the survey in March to visit Saipan and discuss the surveys with you.

Respectfully,

Robert A. Conard, M.D.

- cc: Mrs. E.P. Farrington Dr. V.P. Bond
- Dr. John Totter Dr. E.P. Cronkite
- Dr. William Peck
- Mr. William Bonnet ✓

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