

1/28/77

To the People of Rongelap

I wish to thank you for your letter of October 1, 1976, bringing to my attention your views on the medical care of those of you who were exposed to the radiation from the fallout. I have carefully considered your views and appreciate the opportunity to answer your questions.

First, I would like to comment with regard to travel of Marshallese patients to the United States. Since only very few Americans know your language, it is indeed necessary for Marshallese attendants to accompany patients that come to the U.S. for treatment. Unfortunately, on two occasions, this did not occur for various reasons. I have been assured, however, that every effort will be made in the future to have all patients accompanied by English-speaking Marshallese attendants. Also, when traveling outside the Trust Territory adequate travel funds will be provided. In addition, I will urge the Trust Territory officials to arrange necessary papers, such as passports, well in advance.

Whenever the Brookhaven doctors are at Rongelap, they give anyone with sickness the best treatment available under the circumstances. As in the past, any exposed person with a disease that appears to be caused by radiation exposure will be taken to the U.S. for treatment if necessary. In the case that adequate facilities are available locally, patients who require hospitalization will be treated in the Trust Territory hospitals. Dr. Knudsen will assist in the treatment of the patients at these hospitals. Medicines needed for treatment at Rongelap that are not available from the Trust Territory Department of Health Services will, if possible, be provided by ERDA doctors.

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We are sorry that there have been conflicting reports about the future health of the exposed people of Rongelap. Specifically, I strongly disagree with the Japanese newspaper report that it is necessary to leave Rongelap because of the radiation levels on the atoll. There have been many tests of soil, plants, and water on the island, and measurements of urine and radiation in the people living on Rongelap. These tests show that the levels are low and they are getting less and less. I share the opinion of the Brookhaven doctors that the little bit of radiation left on the island would not be expected to cause any health effects. I hope to be able to make arrangements for several scientists, not from the U.S., to visit Rongelap in the near future and discuss with you their findings.

We are pleased with the remarks made in your letter about the Brookhaven medical team. I have a great deal of confidence in Drs. Conard and Knudsen and the other fine doctors that have taken part in the medical program. I am sure they always had your welfare at heart.

I am convinced that the medical examinations of the Rongelap people have been very thorough and complete with many tests on the people and on their blood, urine, etc. Some of the most skillful doctors in the U.S. and from other countries have taken part in these examinations. They have used the best equipment possible that can be taken to the island. You can be sure that the examination program ensures early diagnosis and treatment of all disease.

Currently, arrangements are being discussed to permit all the people living on Rongelap, including children, to have an examination at least once a year by the Brookhaven doctors. I am also discussing plans with the Trust Territory to provide further education for the Health Aides in the diagnosis and treatment of radiation effects.

I realize that at the time of the annual examinations, there is sufficient disruption of life and that the team should provide additional food. I am, therefore, recommending that a sufficient amount of food be furnished by the team during the period of the examination.

Members of my staff and I have had several discussions with Dr. Conard regarding the past and future medical care of the Rongelap people. From these discussions, it has become clear to me that effective medical care can only be provided if the doctors can spend enough time with the people of Rongelap to talk to them and answer their questions. I am, therefore, asking Dr. Conard and the other doctors to make arrangements to stay on at Rongelap for as long as necessary to make sure that all people get a chance to talk to them.

I had hoped to discuss these matters with you at the meeting on Rongelap. Unfortunately, I am unable to attend, but have asked Dr. William Burr to represent me at the meeting and read this letter to you. I would like to extend my best wishes to all the people of Rongelap.

Sincerely,

James L. Liverman, Director
Division of Biomedical and
Environmental Research

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