



UNITED STATES  
ENERGY RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20545

To the Chiefs and All People in Utirik Atoll

Your letter to Mr. Roger Ray, dated July 1976, has been received by this office. I wish to thank you for sending this letter and bringing your views to my attention. I have carefully considered your views, as presented in your letter, and 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 more than 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 their best judgment, the American doctors estimated that the people of Utirik were exposed to only a small amount of radiation. Hence, there was general agreement among the doctors and they told the Utirik people that they would not, in the future, show any ill effects caused by radiation. Also, the relatively low levels of radiation at Utirik soon diminished sufficiently to permit the people to return to their atoll before some of the other populations. Rongelap, on the other hand, 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 led to the conclusion that the Utirik people were exposed to considerably less radiation than the people of Rongelap, one must conclude that they are essentially correct. This conclusion is based in part on the dose estimates from measurements on the island. Even more important is that the Utirik people showed only very minor, if any, symptoms of early

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disease from exposure, indicating that their exposure must have been considerably less than the people of Rongelap Island. There is one exception, however, and that relates to the radiation dose to the children's thyroid which I shall address later in this letter.

Following the return to the island, it was decided that continued medical examinations of the exposed people of Utirik were to be done. Such examinations were conducted at regular intervals to assure that they had not been harmed. Examinations were done in 1957, 1959, 1963, 1966, 1969, 1972 and 1975. During the past six years, thyroid examinations were done and sick calls were held every year in addition to complete physical examinations. Also, for the past several years, American doctors have visited Utirik every three months.

In addition to examining the people who have been exposed to radiation, the doctors selected a control group so that they could compare the health of exposed and non-exposed people. This control group consists of unexposed people from Rongelap and 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 (who were not themselves exposed) have not been included in the regular examinations. Large groups of children of exposed parents have been studied elsewhere. None of these studies revealed any radiation-caused illness or defects. Hence, it was expected that the health of this group of children of Utirik would not be affected. Of course, all children are examined and treated as needed at sick calls whenever the doctors visit Utirik.

As I said earlier in this letter, many facts about radiation were not known back in 1954 but the best available medical judgment was used in decisions affecting the people of Utirik. Studying the same problems now and 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. It

is not surprising that, with the information then available, thyroid disease was not expected in the Utirik people. Even more important is that only very recently information became available from several sources that the thyroid gland, especially in children, is considerably more sensitive to radiation than was anticipated in 1954. Taking these factors together, we believe now, many years later, that the thyroid cancers in the Utirik people were probably caused by radiation. At this time we are not able to predict whether more cases are to be expected in the exposed members of the Utirik 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 leaders of the people of Utirik explain to their people the purpose and the importance of the regular medical examinations.

Many people living in the Marshall Islands District suffer from diabetes. During the visits, the doctors from ERDA have tried to learn more about this disease so that they could better treat the people. Not all doctors agree about the kinds of medicine to be used for treatment. I feel confident that the treatment used by Dr. Knudsen, and as recommended by an expert in this disease, will benefit the Utirik people that suffer from this disease.

With regard to your concern about the arrow-root plants, I have no reason to believe that the reduced size of the plants is caused by radiation. I say this because from what is known about radiation effects in plants, the levels of radiation on Utirik are far too low to cause plant damage.

Conducting the medical examinations and treating people of the islands whenever necessary has been largely in the hands of Drs. Conard and Knudsen, and during the past year, Dr. Kotrady. On many occasions, expert medical advice was invited from the best doctors in the field, many of whom as you know participated in the actual medical examinations. It is my belief that Drs. Conard, Knudsen and Kotrady are 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 this, I am greatly surprised to learn about the apparent displeasure on the part of the people of Utirik as expressed in your letter and more recently about your request that Dr. Knudsen leave your island. A possible explanation for this difference in the feelings for Drs. Conard and Knudsen may be a misunderstanding on the part of your people as to the role and reasons for these doctors 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 all of the people whom they visit. Some misunderstanding could result because of the difference between our languages. Again, I would appeal to your leadership and your teachers to impress upon those who had the misfortune to be exposed to radiation the importance of the medical examinations. Only then can you and I be assured that they will continue to receive the best medical care and treatment that we are able to provide.

Together with this letter I am sending you a copy of "A Twenty-Year Review of Medical Findings in a Marshallese Population Accidentally Exposed to Radioactive Fallout." This report contains the data collected during the period from 1954 to 1975 as well as more detailed information of the findings in the past five years. The findings in this report are of great importance in that they have helped the scientist in their understanding of the effects of radiation. Collecting the information in this report has only been possible through continued cooperation from you and your people. I want you to know that this contribution by you and your people has helped the well-being of all people in the world.

I regret deeply that I cannot attend this meeting. Instead, I have asked Dr. William Burr, my Deputy, to read this letter. Please convey my very best wishes to the people of Utirik.

Sincerely,

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

Enclosure:  
As stated

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