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ASSOCIATED UNIVERSITIES, INC., UPTON, L.I., N.Y. 11973

MEDICAL DEPARTMENT

TELEPHONE: (516) 345- 3577

January 12, 1977

Dr. William W. Burr, Jr.  
Deputy Director  
DBER-ERDA  
Washington, D.C. 20545

Dear Bill,

I would like to make a comment concerning the Bakal and Bakal letter of November 15, 1976 to Dr. Robert Seamans.

The letter states that the December 1976 medical survey expedition to the atoll was cancelled as a result of their clients demand for compensation. The real reason was that Dr. Knudsen was asked to leave the island and he told them he would not return until the people asked him to. I do not know what the basis is for their claim that the second generation children were afflicted. We have not been examining these children but we have seen nothing of this nature in the children of the more heavily exposed Rongelap group. I realize that there are many more statements in the letter that will have to be examined in some depth.

I am happy to learn you will be attending the meetings in the Marshall Islands. We plan on getting Dr. Knudsen here by Jan. 23 in order to have a preliminary meeting with you on January 24 to discuss the agreement. I understand you are inviting DOI representatives, including possibly Peter Coleman, for the afternoon session. We will take the Islip-Washington flight on the 24th and hope to arrive in Germantown by 10 - 10:30 a.m. (Cronkite, Knudsen and I). Vic hopes to join us in the afternoon, I believe.

If there is any further material you need from me for the Island meetings, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Robert A. Conard, M.D.

RAC:gc

*P.S. Would it be possible to hold the meeting in Washington?*

OUTLINE FOR DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN

THE UNITED STATES ENERGY RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION  
AND  
THE TRUST TERRITORY OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS  
REGARDING MEDICAL CARE OF THE RONGELAP AND UTIRIK PEOPLE

The United States Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA), formerly AEC, has for more than 20 years conducted a program of medical surveillance of the people of Rongelap and Utirik that were exposed to fallout from a weapons test in 1954. In the course of this activity, and with the knowledge and consent of the Trust Territory of the Pacific (TTPI), the ERDA medical teams have provided limited medical care for all of the people of Rongelap and Utirik. The ERDA intends to continue this program provided this can be achieved with the consent of the TTPI and the people of Utirik and Rongelap.

The people of Utirik and Rongelap, independently, have recently indicated a desire for changes in the type of medical care under the ERDA program. Specifically, they have requested that ERDA expands and improves medical care of all the people on their islands.

It is recognized by the U.S. (ERDA) that general medical care of the people of the Marshall Islands is a responsibility of the Administration of the TTPI. At the same time, it appears that the request for extended medical care under the ERDA program stems from a change in the perception on the part of the people of Utirik and Rongelap of the manner and extent to which past ERDA activities have affected their lives psychologically, socially, and economically. It appears, therefore, to be in the interest of both the TTPI and the U.S. (ERDA) to explore ways in which these perceived needs can best be met by both parties within framework of their respective responsibilities.

For the purpose of the discussion between the TTPI and the U.S. (ERDA) it is proposed that the U.S. (ERDA) is prepared to assist the TTPI in the discharge of its health care responsibilities to the people

of Rongelap and Utirik. It is agreed that this assistance will be provided in response to Trust Territory requests and may include the following:

- a. ERDA will invite TTPI medical personnel (medical officers, nurses, health aides, technicians) to participate in the ERDA medical visits in order to facilitate expanded programs such as well baby clinics, family planning, etc., and will assist with logistic support of these activities.
- b. ERDA will assist in arranging for additional U.S. medical doctors to participate in the ERDA medical team visits, as may be required to assist the TTPI in providing general medical care to the people of Rongelap and Utirik.
- c. ERDA will, to the extent operationally feasible, extend the duration of its medical team visits to Rongelap and Utirik to accommodate the needs of the Trust Territory medical program.



UNITED STATES  
ENERGY RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515

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

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 that 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 to accompany patients that come to the U.S. for treatment by Marshallese attendants. Unfortunately, on about 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, they will be provided with adequate traveling funds. 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 disease in an exposed person 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 that 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, 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 about 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