

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT OF THE MEDICAL SURVEYS OF THE RONGELAP,
AND UTIRIK ISLANDS IN MARCH 1963, NINE YEARS AFTER EXPOSURE TO
FALLOUT RADIATION

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In March 1963 a medical survey team consisting of 10 physicians and technicians representing the Atomic Energy Commission and 10 from the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, visited the Rongelap and Utirik atolls and carried out a medical survey of the people who had been exposed to fallout radiation in 1954. An unexposed group on Rongelap who served as a comparison population were also examined. Since complete analysis of the data will take months, the following preliminary statement is made at this time.

On arrival of the team in the Marshall Islands, a serious epidemic of poliomyelitis Type I, with many paralytic cases, was in progress. However, the epidemic had been brought under control by widespread immunization with Sabine oral vaccine. There were 22 cases among the Rongelap children with varying degrees of paralysis and the disease had also affected three adults on the island with one death from bulbar paralysis of a 67 year old woman in the exposed group. Fortunately the people of Utirik were spared the epidemic.

Otherwise the medical examinations of both Rongelap and Utirik people revealed they were generally in good health and appeared to be in a better state of nutrition and with less skin disease than has been noted previously. About the same incidence of diseases was noted in the exposed population as in the unexposed comparison population. No cases of cancer, leukemia or other diseases believed to be enhanced by radiation exposure were noted. No evidence of any malignant change in the residual radiation (beta) burns of the exposed Rongelap people was noted. In several cases, these areas of the skin showed further development of pigmented (mole-like) changes, which however are not considered serious complications. A number of biopsies of the skin were obtained for detailed study. Several of the exposed Rongelap group continued to show slightly retarded growth and development but otherwise appeared to be healthy.

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During the past year on Rongelap four deaths had occurred in the exposed group; three in older people (one of whom was referred to above - died from polio) and one in a young man whose death was associated with a fall from a coconut tree. Two deaths had occurred in the unexposed group. None of these deaths appeared to be related to radiation exposure. One stillbirth with congenital abnormalities was born to exposed parents, the significance of which is being investigated. The usual number of healthy babies were born to both exposed and unexposed groups. Aside from the epidemic of poliomyelitis at Rongelap, the only other epidemics worthy of note were gastroenteritis of a rather severe nature among several children who were treated successfully and a few cases of sickness from eating arrow root flour (which probably had not been properly prepared).

Vital statistics of the people of Utirik during the past three years since last seen were not remarkable with mortality and causes of death and the number of births about the same in the exposed and unexposed groups. No unusual epidemics or types of disease that might be associated with radiation effects had occurred on Utirik.

There was excellent cooperation of both Rongelap and Utirik people in carrying out examinations and the friendly relationship between the examining group and the people was most gratifying. This spirit was believed to be enhanced by the fact that prior to the surveys, meetings were held with the people about the examinations and their purpose, and at the end of the surveys, they were informed of the general results. The people were most appreciative of the things done for them and particularly enjoyed the movies, music, and the "going away party" that the team provided.

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