

FIVE MARSHALL ISLANDERS TO BE EXAMINED AT
BROOKHAVEN MEDICAL CENTER

Upton, New York, May , 1966. Five people from Rongelap Atoll in the Marshall Islands of the Pacific will be brought to the Medical Research Center of AEC's Brookhaven National Laboratory at Upton, L.I., N.Y., this month for clinical examination and possible surgery. They have nodules -- a thickening or hardness -- in their thyroid glands which appear to be the result of exposure to fallout radiation from an atmospheric nuclear detonation at Bikini 12 years ago. Of the five, one is a mature woman, three are girls in their early teens, and one is a young woman under 21 years of age.

The five additional cases, noted early this year during the continuing annual medical surveys of the islanders, bring the total number of thyroid cases to 16 out of the original 82 Rongelap people who were exposed. The thyroid nodules were first detected in March, 1964, during the tenth annual medical survey of the people of Rongelap and Utirik Atolls. Thirteen of 19 children in the more heavily exposed group, all of whom had been exposed at less than ten years of age, had nodules. All nodules of those children who were examined or treated surgically were found to be benign. Only one person, a woman of 40 years, had cancer of the thyroid, for which she received surgery a year ago, and is now doing well. In addition, there were two boys with hypothyroidism in the exposed group who had previously shown growth retardation. These boys have improved as a result of the thyroid hormone therapy instituted six months ago.

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Of interest among the twelfth annual medical survey observations was the absence of thyroid abnormalities in the 40 Utirik children examined who were of the same ages as the high-incidence group of exposed children on Rongelap. The Utirik children had received considerably less radiation exposure.

BACKGROUND

Following the detonation of a thermonuclear device on March 1, 1954, during atmospheric tests in the Pacific Proving Grounds, an unpredicted shift in winds caused deposition of significant amounts of fallout on four inhabited atolls east of Bikini. These were Rongelap, Ailinginae, Rongerik and Utirik Atolls. Rongelap received the largest radiation exposure. Eighty-two people of Rongelap Atoll were accidentally exposed to fallout radiation where the average whole body exposure was approximately 175 roentgens. Additional amounts of radiation resulted from absorption of radioiodine in the thyroid glands. Since that time the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission and the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands have sponsored annual medical surveys of the exposed people. The surveys are carried out by a Brookhaven National Laboratory team, headed by Dr. Robert A. Conard from the Laboratory's Medical Research Center.

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Immediately after the 1954 exposure the people were evacuated to Kwajalein Atoll for treatment and were subsequently on Majuro Atoll until 1957 when they were returned to Rongelap. On their return to their home atoll the United States provided them with a new village and other facilities and services to assist their re-establishment. The current population of Rongelap is about 228 persons. Last year Congress appropriated \$950,000 as "compassionate relief" payment to the exposed population.