

STATEMENT CONCERNING UTIRIK GRIEVANCES

The following statements briefly outlines the background and development of the grievances expressed by the people of Utirik Atoll concerning the BNL sponsored medical examinations in their letter to Mr. Roger Ray of July 9, 1976.

Decisions regarding medical examinations and treatment of the Marshallese people exposed to fallout radiation during the past 22 years have been based on expert medical advise from outstanding specialists in the field of radiation effects, many of whom have participated in the examinations. In addition approval for the manner in which the examinations of the Utirik and Rongelap people were being conducted was documented by an observer group appointed by the Congress of Micronesia in 1972. This group consisted of several outstanding physicians from Japan, England and the United States.

Frequency of examinations; lack of expectancy of late thyroid effects:

Soon after the examinations of the Marshallese began in 1954, it was known that the Utirik people had received only a slight dusting of fallout with an estimated whole body dose 14 rads as compared with 175 rads in the Rongelap people. None of the Utirik people showed acute effects as did the Rongelap people and it was the general medical consensus that this group would not likely show detectable effects in the future and the people were told of this. It was decided that complete medical examinations every three years would be adequate for this group while annual examinations were indicated for the Rongelap people in view of the much greater exposure and acute radiation effects.* The degree of thyroid exposure from radioiodines

*In addition to the complete physical examination there have been thyroid and "sick calls" on an annual basis since 1968. Since 1954 the Utirik people have had complete examination in 1957, 1959, 1963, 1969, 1972 and 1975. Also in recent years there have been quarterly visits to Utirik as well as Rongelap by the resident physician.

absorbed from the fallout was not realized at that time, particularly in the children, and so thyroid effects were not anticipated even in the Rongelap group. In retrospect this is not surprising since only relatively recently has the degree of sensitivity of the thyroid, particularly in children, for the development of radiation-induced tumors begun to be appreciated. It is likely that the United States populations with thyroid exposures have not been as carefully followed as the Utirik population.

Control groups:

In 1954 an unexposed group of the Marshallese people living at Majuro was first chosen as a control group, but this group proved unsatisfactory and in 1958 a control population of some of the unexposed Rongelap people was established. These people were relatives of the exposed group and consisted of 150-200 people. This group is considered quite adequate as a control group for both Rongelap and Utirik people. The slight differences in ethnic background between the two populations did not constitute reasons for having separate control groups.

Children of exposed parents:

The children of the exposed islanders have not been included on the regular examination list. This has not been considered necessary since studies of considerably larger groups of children of exposed parents in Japan have not revealed any clear-cut genetic effects and it was therefore felt that such studies on the Marshallese children were not indicated. Though the children have not been included for regular examinations they are examined and treated, ^{at sick call} during the visits of our doctors to Utirik and Rongelap. The lack of inclusion of children of exposed on our examination list has been the cause of considerable unrest among the exposed people. Enclosures 1 and 2 present the ERDA stand on this issue.

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Political interference:

About 5 years ago a Marshallese congressman attacked the United States and the medical team with absurd charges concerning the exposed Marshallese and medical examinations and in 1971 he invited a Japanese "medical team" to the Marshalls to check-up on our examinations. The team was composed of largely reporters with one Japanese woman doctor. The attempt was thwarted by the High Commissioner because of inadequate credentials of the group. This infuriated the politicians who caused our March 1972 examinations of the Rongelap and Utirik people to be aborted. A special committee on Rongelap and Utirik was formed by the Congress of Micronesia who organized a medical observer group in 1972, referred to at the beginning. The committee published a sizeable book covering our examinations and the observers report, the results of which were generally favorable to us and did much, at least, temporarily, to quiet the unrest.

Congress of Micronesia bills and TTPI - ERDA agreement:

During the past few years two bills were formulated at the instigation of the Congress of Micronesia 1) A hospital benefit bill (Public Law 5-52) to allow for free hospitalization, transportation and per diem for exposed Rongelap and Utirik patients and included the control group of unexposed Rongelap people who are on 7th examination list. This has been the cause of further unrest, which no doubt plays a strong role in the present crisis, particularly in Utirik. The complaints associated with this law largely concerns the fact that the Utirik people feel that there should be a control group for their population. The unexposed Utirik people are not entitled to the benefits of the bill as are the Rongelap control population. Also the Rongelap and Utirik people as pointed out above feel that the children of exposed parents

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considerably higher than in the Rongelap population. Puzzling also is the fact that if the cancer cases are subtracted from the total thyroid tumor incidence in the exposed Utirik people the benign lesions are no more numerous than found in the unexposed Marshallese populations. It is clear that the occurrence of 3 thyroid cancer cases in the Utirik population (which at that time equaled the Rongelap exposed incidence) caused the Utirik people to believe that their exposure had been greater than they had been led them to believe. This probably helped precipitate the latter of grievances submitted by the Utirik people.

The people's reaction toward the team leader is understandable to some extent, but their remarks about Dr. Knudsen are completely unjustified. Dr. Knudsen is an excellent physician, has been dedicated to the health care of the Marshallese and has been well liked and respected by the people.

Robert A. Conard, M.D. 8-10-76

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Enclosures