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Radiation and Public Health

As testing of nuclear weapons continues and as more nuclear reactors come into operation, the need to answer questions about the effects of radiation upon health and longevity will become more urgent. Up until now, the primary responsibility for the control and measurement of atomic radiation has been in the hands of the Atomic Energy Commission, although the Public Health Service has played an ancillary role.

The Atomic Energy Commission has had a twofold obligation: to develop and test atomic weapons and reactors and to guard its own workers and the public against excessive doses of radiation. As many people have pointed out, this double function entails a potential conflict of interest, a conflict between the need for testing and the need for keeping the exposure to a minimum. Accordingly, it is noteworthy that the Public Health Service is taking steps to play a larger part in the field of radiation. The service has appointed a National Advisory Committee on Radiation and has asked for an appropriation of \$608,000 for its radiological health work—an increase of 50 percent over its appropriation for the current year.

This appropriation will, if granted, permit a moderate expansion in the service's several programs: development of standardized instruments for radiation measurement and analysis; training of radiation health officers for the states; help for medical schools and departments and schools of public health in the training of people in biophysics and public health engineering; measurement of fallout (a network of more than 40 stations for collecting air samples is now in operation); and measurements of radioactivity in samples of milk, food, and water.

This expansion will supplement, rather than replace or compete with, the similar activities of the Atomic Energy Commission. It represents a clear recognition of radiation as a potential public health problem, and it has the merit of relieving the AEC of a part of its responsibility for public health. But, more important, the move will provide an independent source of information about the levels of radiation, and this information will be appraised primarily from the standpoint of public health rather than from the standpoint of weapon development.

The increased interest of the Public Health Service cannot be expected to provide quick answers to the disputed—and highly important—question of whether there is or is not a threshold to low doses of radiation, but the service can be expected to incline to the view that the wise course is to assume that even low doses may be harmful. It may further be expected to aid the states in following the dictum in National Bureau of Standards Handbook 59, which urges "that exposures to radiation be kept at the lowest practicable level in all cases." Through its Bureau of State Services, the service can also be expected to encourage the states to pass legislation that will ensure that the new and more rigorous standards for dosage proposed by the National Committee on Radiation Protection and Measurement will become nationwide.

During this interim period when knowledge of radiation effects at low doses is incomplete, the Public Health Service has an important role to play. The importance of its role will be no less when adequate knowledge becomes available. We trust that Congress will approve the modest budget request that will permit the service to do the job that ought to be done. —G.DuS.