

March 29, 1971

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Dear Doctor Djurić:

Thanks for your letter of March 12. I am pleased to hear about the progress of your work in studying the situation which exists in the Meza Valley, and I hope sometime in the not too distant future to have an opportunity to study your reports.

I'm afraid I failed to say clearly what I had in mind in connection with the significance of your investigations in relation to certain of our problems in the United States. I had no intention, whatever, of deprecating the usefulness of your work in revealing information about lead in the environment of people generally, in your own country in the area of the investigation, or in the United States. It should, indeed, have considerable influence on the situation. What I meant to say is that the findings of fact will have little to do with the point of view in this country concerning the problem of lead in the atmosphere derived from the use of lead-containing fuel in automobiles. Indeed, the question of the continued use of lead in gasoline here will not be decided on hygienic grounds at all, but rather on the basis of technical considerations. However, if one assumes that hygienic issues are important issues in the matter, the problem here differs technically from your problem there, in that it relates to a different compound of lead in a different state of subdivision, and in a different quantity in the air. Moreover, your emission of lead from smelter stacks and other sources can be reduced much more definitively and simply through the use of comparatively few pieces of effective equipment, while the elimination of lead discharged from the tailpipes of automobiles scattered all over the country is an extremely complex matter.

There are, of course, many other aspects of the problem of the contamination of the environment with the exhausts of automobiles, so that if you assume that it is merely a matter of the toxicity of lead, and of its concentration in the air, you are entirely on the wrong track. We, in this Laboratory, have studied this matter for a long time, and have obtained a large body of pertinent information, of which only a fragment has been published. But the work goes on in the study of the basic problems. Neither will the things which you are doing now, nor those which we are doing now, answer the questions, with respect to the total set of mechanisms concerned with the effects of the absorption of lead upon man. The questions, in fact, increase in number with the investigations which are under way at present, and the investigative approaches will increase in number with time. These will be under way when both of us have vanished from the scene, for

the issues here go as deep into biology, and the general areas of the biological sciences, as do most of the questions concerning the nature and behavior of living materials.

You are quite right, of course, in saying that these matters cannot be dealt with properly through correspondence, but the matter is even much more nearly impossible than you indicate, for if we were to handle the matter satisfactorily face to face, we should have to know a great deal more than we now know.

Incidentally, what is true of this matter, is even more so in many others which relate to the environment of the earth and what we (mankind generally) are doing to it because of our economic and social (growth of population, for example) pressures. We shall have to work very hard and learn a great deal more, if we, as a race, are to survive, in reasonable safety and comfort, on this planet in the decades that are to come.

With kind regards,

Sincerely yours,

Robert A. Kehoe, M.D.
Professor Emeritus of
Occupational Medicine

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