

July 23, 1959

Mrs. Claire L. Ribbe
Route #111 and Town Line Road
Hauppauge, Long Island
New York

Dear Mrs. Ribbe:

Your letter of June 17th addressed to the Sloan-Kettering Institute, referred to this Laboratory (mistakenly referred to as the Kettering Institute) by Dr. Rhoads of the Sloan-Kettering Institute, has suffered some delay in being answered, because of my preoccupation with other more immediate matters. I trust that this delay has not resulted in a heightening of your concern and that of your associates.

The question which you pose in your letter, while not unreasonable from a certain viewpoint, is never the less, quite difficult, if not entirely impossible, to answer in anything approaching a satisfactory manner. The fact is that there is no answer to your question, for there is no direct information concerning the relationship of such air pollution as you describe to the induction of lung cancer. I shall give you such opinion as I have, based on indirect evidence and a life time of experience with the effects of the contamination of the atmosphere of industrial plants with a wide variety of pollutants. You can take it of course, or leave it, for there is no proof of its correctness.

I can say, quite honestly, that I should have no fear of the danger of lung cancer in connection with the operation of a community incinerator. I would be concerned about the location and the technical efficiency of such an incinerator for aesthetic reasons and for reasons relating to its capacity for creating a nuisance. The latter qualities can be controlled by judicious choice and proper design of the combustion equipment, and so I would not be unreasonable in my attitude toward them, but I certainly would want to know that these matters had been well considered. I repeat, however, that I would not give the cancer problem more than a casual thought, for the fact is that there is no evidence on which to relate the products of the combustion of ordinary combustible wastes to the occurrence of human lung cancer.

There is some reason for concern about the type of air pollution

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that comes from the discharge of exhaust gas from automobiles in association with dense automobile traffic. There is a statistical evidence that human habits of smoking have some effective part in the lung cancer problem. There is no satisfactory proof in either of these instances, nor is there an understandable mechanism, but attention has been concentrated on them to such an extent that their potentialities cannot be ignored. There is no other feature of general air pollution, i.e., community air pollution in the United States about which one can do more than speculate at this time. It would be idle chatter, therefore, for me to go farther in this discussion. Perhaps just a bit of common sense and balance can be introduced into the current attitude on the subject, if it be recognized that the human struggle for life and health has been going on persistently for many centuries. It may well be that we are running into new dangers (I believe that we are) through the successful efforts of technologists to harness various forms of energy and to put to use our various natural resources on a large quantity - production basis. On the other hand, because of the application of medical and hygienic research, the death rate among our people in childhood and youth has reached an all-time low, and the life expectation of a large segment of our population has been increased to an all-time high. We have little cause for undue apprehension. Medical research is continuing and is extending into new fields, among which are those concerned with such man-made hazards as air-pollution, water-pollution, food contamination, and the like.

For the foregoing reasons, I think you should not bring the factor of health into the matter about which you are concerned. As I indicated above, there may be good aesthetic reasons for objecting to the proposed location of the incinerator. There may also be economic reasons - property values, for example. There is, I think, no valid hygienic factor.

Very truly yours,

Robert A. Kehoe, M.D.

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