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February 2, 1954

Dr. Kieffer Davis
Medical Director
Phillips Petroleum Company
Bartlesville, Oklahoma

Dear Kieffer:

I should like to sit down and talk with you about a number of matters that relate to the subject of your letter of January 25, and perhaps this can be done when you come to the Laboratory to give a Saturday morning seminar. I hope so. Meanwhile I shall undertake to reply as well as I can to your specific questions.

The standards which we apply to the selection of men who engage in the operations for mixing antiknock compounds with gasoline are not capable of statement as specifications, since they are left to the judgment of the members of the medical staff of Ethyl Corporation who do the work in the field. These are sound and experienced men, who undertake to achieve the general purposes of the Medical Department of the Corporation with the least interference with the policies of the employer of these men, and also with the least possible dislocation of the working relationships of the men themselves.

For a time, in the early period of this rather unique program of medical supervision, we were fairly rigid in our requirements, since anything that developed in a man was altogether too likely to be blamed upon tetraethyl lead. As the years passed and we were able to demonstrate the complete adequacy of the methods of protecting the men against the hazards of the work, we relaxed somewhat, in order to conform to the best canons of good industrial medical practice, in that we excluded few people, and then only for the most obvious reasons. In some places few men are available for the job, and in others there are good reasons, in terms of the personal reliability and responsibility of a man, for overlooking physical handicaps of certain types.

On the side of age, we prefer in all instances to avoid minors, because of the strong flavor of prejudice relating to juvenile susceptibility to lead, as well as the general feeling that minors should not be engaged in unduly hazardous occupations. We prefer not to use old men, for a number of reasons, but sometimes an older man is the best man available in terms of his intelligence, reliability and responsiveness to our instructions.

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The one thing we undertake to avoid is the existence or the likelihood of nervous involvement that may simulate or be confused with the effects of the absorption of tetraethyl lead. We don't want alcoholics, drug addicts or psychotic people under any circumstances, while the stigmata of inadequately treated syphilis, with its potentialities for the neurological manifestations of this disease, are always a cause for rejection. Otherwise, we avoid persons with progressive disease of a significant type, whenever we can. However, in this group of men who are working at present, are a few controlled diabetics, some persons with evidence of hypertensive vascular disease, and certain other persons whose states are far from ideal. These men must work for a living, and they are employed by petroleum companies. We do not want to be responsible for contributing to their loss of their jobs. Consequently we acquaint the responsible physician (when there is one) with our findings, and carry along with them as well as we can.

By way of justification, I'd like to point out that we have had no case of lead poisoning among these people in the entire period of our activities, and only one claim for compensation based on alleged lead absorption has come to light in this period of twenty-eight years since we began in 1926 (the one claim was obviously spurious and was denied).

If you are having any difficulties on the score of these men, tell me about them, and I'll do my best to help you out if there is anything we can do. I'd like to discuss some of the aspects of this matter with you, for our own advantage, since we have more trouble with some of your people, in connection with some of your Company's policies (or at least some of its practices) than we do with almost any other group. Don't quote me in this to your people, for I don't want to make more trouble, but it is merely an indication that it might be well if we were to find common ground together in some of these matters.

Sincerely yours,

Robert A. Kehoe, M. D.

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