

March 18, 1969

Dr. G. Löfroth
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Dear Doctor Löfroth:

Please accept my thanks for your letter of March 3rd. So far as my early views may have been expressed about the problem of mercury in certain bodies of water before it came to be known (at least to me) that the compound involved is methyl mercury, it would have been wiser, I believe, if I had held my peace. But I have clarified my present position with some of your colleagues.

I learned some time ago of the action of the Swedish authorities in the matter of the lead content of motor gasoline. This, I should say, is fully within their own province, and I do not consider that I should comment on it. after the fact. I should hope, however, that the alleged carcinogenic potentialities of tetraethyllead were not, in fact, a very potent factor in the decision. This indeed would be going far afield to find a mere pretext for regulatory action. One can certainly not take seriously the so-called evidence of this quality of tetraethyllead. Some hundreds of men, running up into the thousands by this time, have been engaged in the manufacture of this compound in the United States alone, and have absorbed some quantity of tetraethyllead during every working day for many years. Their exposure has been of a low (tolerable) level, and has been well controlled within such limits. The medical supervision has been of high quality, and the medical records are excellent. The rate of occurrence of cancer within this group of men has been well below that in the comparable segment of the general population. There is nothing which would even suggest that a hazard of this type exists. This is not the only contribution to negative evidence, but in view of the extremely scanty opportunity for exposure to tetraethyllead in the general environment, it should be sufficient to convince any reasonable investigator that there is no such threat.

There are occasions and circumstances which cause me to wonder, from time to time, whether we shall be able to afford much longer to leave judgments in matters of technology or public health to be made in the atmosphere of politics and trumped up public opinion. What is involved in many instances is money, and in other equally spurious and unimportant (socially) matters, but some time in the future such decisions may cut deep into the vital affairs of life, as I am convinced that they have done at times in the past.

Again my thanks for your letter and reprint,

Cordially,

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Robert A. Kehoe, M.D.
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Occupational Medicine