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THE RECORD

September 20, 1979

Deputy Chief, Cancer Branch
Chronic Diseases Division
Bureau of Epidemiology

A Meeting at the New Mexico State Health and Environment Department on
August 17 Concerning the Uranium Mill Tailings Spill in Church Rock,
New Mexico

Ray Kroiss, Jim Ruttember, Leica Schiffman, and I met with representatives
of the State Health and Environment Department and the Indian Health
Service to discuss the epi-aid investigation relating to the tailings
spill. A list of those present at the meeting is appended.

The meeting began with a review by Tom Buhl of the Environmental
Improvement Division of the circumstances surrounding the spill and
of the monitoring results that were available. Apparently the
tailings slurry tunneled under the clay dam (which had been constructed
in 1977) at approximately 1:00 a.m. on July 16th. Approximately eleven
hundred tons of solids were released along with 94 million gallons of
liquid. A secondary catchment dam overflowed within a couple of
hours but prevented even greater environmental releases from
occurring. The earliest samples available were from this catchment
area. At the time of our meeting the cause of the dam break had
not been determined and, therefore, the dam was not going to be
repaired until the investigation was complete. There was no rain
following the spill until August 6th, leading to drying of dissolved
materials as a yellow powder which was clearly evident along the
banks of the creek bed; since August 6th, rains have moved this
material on, in a sequence of alternating flooding and drying.
Appended to this memo are measurements and descriptions supplied
by Tom Buhl concerning the environmental monitoring data.

Dr. George Goldstein who is Secretary of Health and Environment for
the state of New Mexico presented his major concerns which were:
1) how the state could help the Indian Health Service; 2) the long-
term issues related to the cleanup of the environment; 3) the
possibility that drying of the radionuclides might lead to potential
harm from inhalation, particularly for workers involved in the
cleanup; 4) whether the dissolved heavy metals (vanadium, arsenic
and others) might be of potential import. Dr. Goldstein felt the
CDC role was to help the Indian Health Service and the state to
find any exposed individuals (particularly children) and see that
they were properly tested for any evidence of body burden of
radionuclides.

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Dr. Haffner of the Indian Health Service concurred in the proposed CSC role. She also mentioned that the Indian Health Service would be purchasing a number of sheep and cattle for slaughter and subsequent analysis by the EPA (for radionuclides) and by Texas A&M (for heavy metals).

A press conference was held shortly after this meeting concluded. Arrangements were then made for the CSC group to go to Chinle, New Mexico the next morning to meet with representatives of the Indian Health Hospital and the Navajo Reservation and begin the investigation.

Henry Falk, M.D.

BE:CDP:CB:HTalk:cfa (9/20/79)

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