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TWIN CITIES

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August 24, 1982

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL -- Corrected

Confidential blind pc:  
David Jacobs  
Henry Taylor  
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8/24/82  
vsent/sep

Dr. Ancel Keys  
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Dear Ancel:

Thanks very, very much for your July 30th memo on the Berlin manuscript. I quite agree with you in the need to look at total mortality in respect to any and all risk predictors. But, I think that is an entirely separate issue from the hypotheses in respect to total cholesterol and coronary mortality. On what plausible basis is such an hypothesis about all deaths?

I guess I feel that the diet-TC-CHD issues cannot simply be abandoned just because of a lack of current or personal interest in them. I am sure that you recognize, as I have tried to emphasize, that the findings, and your interpretations of them, on cholesterol and coronary disease in the Seven Countries put the diet-heart issue in question. I am sure that you are also getting tired of "not" hearing that for me personally it is not comprehensible to put this new look at the old data into perspective of your and our older analyses and hypotheses without suggesting frankly where they may still hold or where you and your "followers" may have been mistaken or used improper models or whatever. I guess I feel that it is not really responsible to say at one time "it is" and then again "it isn't" without saying something about why and what has happened in the thinking. That is actually what I mean by "implications" as well as the implications towards public health policy on diet which you find it impossible to make. Thus, I feel strongly that you owe it to yourself, and will add vigorously that you owe it to your Seven Countries and other professional colleagues, to make these implications or to leave off all interpretations whatever.

I would certainly expect that you would see the incongruity of my writing an editorial with Geoffrey Rose or Jerry Stamler or anyone and also being a co-author of this particular Seven Countries paper. I am puzzled by that suggestion.

I guess I'm feeling that just "looking at facts" as you claim to have done in the past for obesity, tobacco smoking, and now for blood cholesterol has created more confusion than insights. I recognize that it is extremely important to publish the data. I and others are concerned however about your not making reasonable and broad interpretations. I personally feel that investigators closest to the issues and the data have the responsibility to pose

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alternative explanations and mechanisms and to help create understanding where there is apparent difficulty. Where the issues are unclear, say so, and say very specifically what might be needed to resolve them.

Since you do indeed make some interpretations and they suggest that under certain conditions, in such and such populations, obesity, tobacco and cholesterol "are not important," I, therefore, suggest directly and in a friendly manner to you that you owe it to your colleagues and co-signers to seek concensus on those interpretations or else to make none at all and to write your editorial opinions without your collaborators who might not want to join in that opinion.

To make the interpretations that you have made over the years without seeking, or in recent cases, without accepting concensus from Seven Countries colleagues, at least from those who occasionally think, is not fair. It is simply saying what you want to say when you want to say it without concern for the whole. I guess I am the only one to say these things to you and I am sure that you understand that I do them as a respectful colleague and a long-term friend. I can assure you that others say these things to me about their concern or their annoyance. I am the only one who sticks his neck out.

Maybe the best thing to do here, since our ideas are not much closer together on what interpretation is and what responsibility and speculation might be, would be to solicit the thoughtful commentary of your Seven Countries colleagues, directing their specific attention to your concluding paragraph and asking for their suggestions whether your interpretation should be omitted, changed, or added to. If none of them take up the issue, I imagine that I would simply ask you to withdraw my authorship and write the editorial that you propose I write.

I am, of course, grateful for your general and detailed comments on the Berlin manuscript though, of course, I am disappointed that you didn't find it "helpful." I always thought the speculation on alternative causes and mechanisms was an integral part of the scientific process. I will look more closely whether the speculations we make are indeed untestable. Figure 4, of course, is an idealized display and your criticism is justified. Your "serious questions" about Figure 5 make me wonder whether you understood that it was tongue-in-cheek and meant to be nonsense. It was directed at Mike Oliver's illogical recommendations that everybody should have a cholesterol around 200, but not below. It shows the implausibility of such a distribution.

I am enjoying what amounts to an improved dialogue though neither of us appears to be impressing each other very much with our arguments.

Regards,

Henry Blackburn, M.D.  
Professor and Director

/ljb