

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

2101 CONSTITUTION AVENUE
WASHINGTON, D. C.

March 5, 1943

Dr. Vannevar Bush, Director
Office of Scientific Research and Development
1530 P Street
Washington, D. C.

Dear Dr. Bush:

This is in reply to your letter of February 19, 1943, to Dr. Jewett relative to the problem presented to the Committee on Medical Research and to you by a recommendation to the Committee on Medical Research which originated in the Subcommittee on Venereal Diseases and was approved by the Committee on Medicine of the National Research Council.

The recommendation is that the Committee on Medical Research recommend that the Office of Scientific Research and Development enter into contracts for experiments on volunteers from prison populations involving chemical and chemotherapeutic prophylaxis of gonorrhea. Your letter stated that since this recommendation came from a Committee of the National Research Council

"I ought to know, I think, whether the Academy and Council, having considered the possibility of public reaction, are willing to encounter the risk in view of the results attainable."

In answering your letter we would say that neither the Academy nor Council as organizations ever attempt to express judgment on matters of this kind. All that they can do is to stand sponsor for the competence and integrity of their Committees. In the present case we are satisfied that the members of the Committee on Medicine and its Subcommittee on Venereal Diseases are entirely competent to weigh evidence in this matter and make recommendations in strict conformity therewith.

While, as noted, we cannot express any opinion as being that of the Academy or Council, we can and do herewith express our personal opinions in our official capacities as President of the National Academy of Sciences and Chairman of the National Research Council.

Following receipt of your letter we have made a detailed exhaustive examination of all the pertinent data bearing on the case and have questioned both Dr. Weed, the Chairman of the Division of Medical Sciences of the National Research Council, and Dr. Richards, Chairman of the Committee on Medical Research. The data consist of:

- (1) The records of consideration in both the Subcommittee on Venereal Diseases and the Committee on Medicine.
- (2) Dr. Moore's letter of February 1 to Dr. Richards supporting in extenso the recommendation.
- (3) Various letters from the Surgeons General of the Army, Navy, and Public Health Service.
- (4) Letter of February 26, 1943 from James V. Bennett, Director, Bureau of Prisons, U. S. Department of Justice.
- (5) Letter of March 2, 1943 from Dr. Weed to Dr. Harrison (copy attached) summarizing the history antecedent to the recommendation.

The originals or copies of the foregoing are in our files.

As a result of this examination we find:

- (a) There was complete unanimity of opinion in the Subcommittee on Venereal Diseases; in the Committee on Medicine, and in the Committee on Medical Research as to both the desirability and necessity of performing the experiments on human volunteers and under conditions of rigorous control for at least nine months.
- (b) Volunteers from prison populations appear to be the only group which meets the requirements of control.
- (c) Possibility of securing volunteers in the Federal Prisons is definitely indicated in Mr. Bennett's letter. There is also apparently possibility of volunteers in one or more State prisons.

In view of these findings and our consideration of them we are prepared to advise that in our opinion:

- (1) The experiments are both desirable and necessary from a scientific and medical point of view.
- (2) That subject only to questions of legality and public policy outside the realm of the weight of scientific evidence, the experiments should be undertaken with volunteers from prison populations.

On matters of legality or the probable attitude of public officials whose sanction of the experiments must be obtained and whose conditions must be met we are of course not competent to advise.

So far as risk of adverse public reaction is concerned we realize that opinions differ widely and that the possibility unquestionably exists. It is our mature judgment that in view of the weight of scientific and medical advice and the prospective great and continuing advantage both to the military and civil populations, it is a warranted risk.

We say this in full realization of the fact that the proposed experiments are of a kind and in a field which for ages has been considered by vast numbers of men and women in a peculiar and emotional way quite divorced from scientific or medical evidence of what should be done. We realize also that volunteers from prison populations are not volunteers from a free population and so are subject to allegations of having volunteered under duress to their great permanent detriment.

This allegation can be made either by those opposed in principle to this kind of experimentation or, subsequent to the experiment, by the volunteers themselves. Being criminals it is not unlikely that some among the volunteers may seek to capitalize in this way on their having volunteered.

Offsetting this risk are two undoubted factors: (1) a more reasonable and enlightened point of view of the venereal disease problem among the general population than has previously existed, and (2) the fact that vast numbers of men and women are at present vitally interested in anything which gives promise of safeguarding the health and well-being of men in the armed services.

In view of the duress element of risk and in order to minimize it, it would be our suggestion, if the recommended experiment is undertaken, that the securing of volunteers be placed in the hands of other than prison authorities so far as this is feasible.

Yours truly,

(Signed) FRANK B. JEWETT

President
National Academy of Sciences

(Signed) ROSS G. HARRISON

Chairman
National Research Council

Enclosure: Copy of letter
of March 2, 1943, Weed
to Harrison.

Copies to Drs. Richards and Weed.