

October 10, 1975

Dr. Geradd F. Winfield  
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Division of the Office of Population  
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320 21st Street, N.W.  
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Dear Dr. Winfield,

Several people have independently given me your name as the person I should contact on the following matters. In addition, I was most interested to read your remarks in the enclosed discussion.

I should introduce myself in the context of having been a member of the Advisory Committee on Medical Research for WHO for the last few years. At our last session Director Dr. Mahler and I had several extended discussions on trying to find ways in which basic science could be more immediately useful in meeting health needs of rural people in developing countries. This is an area in which I pretend no expertise but I will be spending some time in Geneva in early December ~~and what~~ what I have to say will be ~~probably~~ primarily an educational exercise for my own benefit.

One issue that I am trying to learn more about is the microbiology of disposal of fecal wastes in a rural sanitation context. I was interested to read the Chinese's Barefoot Doctor's Manual and their advocacy of composting as a disposal procedure. I have also been reading a very large volume of research reports which were sponsored by EPA that is now looking towards composting as the method of ultimate disposal of our own sewage sludges.

It then struck me too as ironic - and this resonates with some of your own remarks in the quoted attachment - that heroic efforts are sometimes being made in developing countries to find the financial resources to develop hydraulic sewage systems, as an alternative to composting; meanwhile we are trying to learn more about composting in order to solve the problems that we simply move from one place to another by our hydraulic engineering!

At any rate, I wonder if you know what may be going on in the AID context of technical support for health development with respect to the furtherance of effective composting technologies. And to you have any clear idea as to how these methods are actually used in practice - do they in fact work according to theory with respect to matters like thermal disinfection

in the compost heaps and so on. The main point is to find out just where a critical evaluation of these procedures in a rural health context is going on and to see what might then be thought about as ways to introduce possible technical improvements.

In any event, I would be delighted to get pointers to other literature or to get some amplification of your remarks on whether there is "enough water in China" - meaning, of course, the extrapolation of this concern to countries with even more pressing problems and fewer resources to deal with them.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

JL/rr