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letter of
comment

December 26, 1967

Mr. W. P. Henry
2446 Huidkoper Place, N.W.
Washington, D. C. 20007

Dear Mr. Henry:

I very much appreciated your thoughtful letter of November 25. I believe I had in fact anticipated some of your questions in the current series of articles, and I thought I might wait for these to run their course before replying to you in person.

The principal source of statistical information on infant mortality that I used was a report "International Comparison of Perinatal and Infant Mortality", a publication of the National Center for Health Statistics, Series 3, No. 6, March 1967. Dr. Helen Chase discusses the statistical implications of different definitions of live birth, and concludes that, for example for Sweden, the discrepancy would amount to a shift of about 1 per thousand of infant death to fetal death.

I agree that we have to entertain the possibility of genetic factors in infant viability. It is very hard to disentangle these from very obvious discrepancies in environmental hygiene in a way that would meet ordinary standards of scientific rigor. However, maternal disease and malnutrition does play such an obvious role in prematurity that it may be splitting hairs to talk about other components. We are certainly a long way from reaching the irreducible minimum of infant mortality!

Of course, I am in profound agreement with you about the population explosion, but this really does not relieve my distress about infant mortality, which is a very hard thing for a mother to bear.

If I have seemed not to stress population control in my articles to a degree commensurate with its importance, it is that I did not see I could contribute very much more scientific insight into this problem than has already been offered from many sources. But that will not deter me from bringing it up again and a again whenever I have an opportunity.

W.P.
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My appeal to you is to express your own concerns about population control to whomever you can influence in government, be it in the legislative or the executive branch. And, also, to contribute to one of the responsible organizations working in this field, like "Planned Parenthood" or the Population Council!

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics