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STANFORD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
Department of Genetics

February 17, 1970

Hon. Gaylord Nelson
United States Senate
Washington, D.C.

Dear Senator Nelson:

May I offer my enthusiastic encouragement in support of your proposals to establish a national saftey testing laboratory and to set up rigorous requirements for testing food additives, drugs, and other consumer products for chronic biological effects. Gene mutation, cancer, and fetal damage are insidious but important hazards that must be scrutinized in advance of release of widely used, and often highly dispensable, products. Once a product is released, it becomes very difficult to trace its injurious effects on the population which is already exposed to such a complex array of other environmental insults.

The cyclamate affair brings out another crucial requirement. Secretary Finch's decision to ban cyclamates from general use must be congratulated. But I must condemn the kind of public information that was associated with the announcement of the decision. Many people were led to believe that the decision was an arbitrary one, necessitated only by the rigorous language of the Delaney amendment, and that cyclamates might in fact be regarded as unlikely to cause any harm in man. No effort was made to educate the public about the cogent scientific reasons for prohibiting the general consumption of cyclamates, or about the experimental difficulties of testing such products in animals to verify their safety in man.

Unless ways can be found of improving public information on these subjects, there will not be the underatanding of the problems on which wise, democratically viable decisions can be reached and enforced. I look forward to hearings on your bills as one approach to this difficulty.

One source of the difficulty in the cyclamata case is the clumsiness and delay in conventional scientific publication. To this date, there is still no convenient way for a scientist to read the details of the experiments on bladder cancer that have underlain the administrative actions. I can suggest two administrative expedients that also deserve legislative endorsement: 1) to make the facilities of the technical report distribution services of the DOD and other governmental agencies available for the prompt documentation of laboratory studies relevant to public health, or to set up a comparable service through the National Library of Medicine; 2) require that data furnished by additive and drug manufacturers that bear adversely on a product be available for detailed publication and general critical scrutiny.

Yours cordially,

Joshua Lederberg,
Professor of Genetics