

My topic today is "Canada's Programme of Radiation Protection". I chose this topic for two reasons. In the first place, I am aware that considerable publicity has been given to such matters as radioactive fallout from nuclear tests and the medical use of X-rays. I am aware, moreover, that this publicity has created confusion and anxiety in the minds of many Canadians. As Minister of National Health and Welfare, I naturally feel a responsibility to do what I can to clarify the situation.

Secondly, I have chosen this topic because of the nature of this audience. You are the nation's leaders in public health, and radiation protection is -- in the view of the Dominion Government -- largely a public health matter. Indeed, I understand that Canada was one of the first countries to so regard it. It was in 1949 that my Department was assigned responsibility for advising the Atomic Energy Control Board on the health aspects of the use of atomic energy and its by-products.

In discussing this topic, I am also anxious to obtain your co-operation in disseminating the facts, in proper perspective, to all Canadians. To my mind, it is of vital importance that our people have a sound and realistic understanding of the problems involved.

Radiation Protection Division

Because this is a complex matter, requiring highly trained staff and special equipment, my Department has established a separate unit within our Health Branch to deal with it. Called the Radiation Protection Division, this unit has three closely related functions -- administration, physical measurements and clinical studies.

From our point of view, the central question is, of course: "What is likely to be the effect on health of exposure to radiation?" This means that in the final analysis our chief interest must be with clinical studies. The other two parts of our programme -- administration and physical measurements -- are, however, essential adjuncts, and their development must necessarily precede that of clinical studies.

Before going into the details of the programme, I might indicate briefly how it has come into being. I have already mentioned the Department's entry in the field in 1949. It was at that time also that plans were made for developing a method of measuring occupational radiation exposures on a country-wide basis. Later we assumed responsibility for the medical use of radioisotopes. In this regard, we have been assisted by an advisory committee composed of leading physicians and physicists.