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Effects of Atomic Radiation

Statement by the Minister of National Health and Welfare, and Chairman of the Canadian Delegation to the tenth session of the United Nations, Mr. Paul Martin, made in the First Committee, November 1, 1955.

The Canadian Delegation agrees with the proposal of the United States for the establishment of a special Technical Committee to co-ordinate information relating to the effects of ionizing radiation because it is conscious of the primacy that must be accorded to human values in the development and application of nuclear energy.

There is no need to re-state in this body all that has been said about the cataclysmic effect for our civilization of the release of nuclear energy. Like all such forces, it has incalculable possibilities of good and evil. It would be cowardly in the extreme to renounce the prospects of good because of the fear of evil. Nor could we now, even if we wanted to do so, exercise the new force we have liberated. We have no alternative but to behave like civilized human beings in the face of this magnificent and terrible challenge. To save ourselves we shall need discipline and intelligence of a high order. We must also be fearless in our pursuit of truth. This is too dangerous a matter to allow us the luxury of personal or national pride and prejudice. It is necessary that we work together on this subject, and I trust that, although differences of view are bound to exist on means and methods, we can at the end attain the splendid unanimity that was achieved - in spirit if perhaps not in fact - at the conclusion of our debate on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Radioactivity, of course, is not a new phenomenon. Since life first appeared on this planet, living beings have been exposed to cosmic and natural radiation from minute quantities of radioactive materials in the soil and elsewhere. With the discovery of X-rays in 1895 and of radium a year later, the possibility emerged that some human beings would be exposed to greater amounts of radiation than naturally occur in the everyday environment.

In the early years, when these new medical tools were used without adequate precautions, a number of persons suffered harmful consequences, and in some cases died, from the cumulative effect of exposure to uncontrolled radiation over a prolonged period. In some industries, too, such as the luminous paint industry, workers have suffered injury and death from radioactive materials taken into the body. Since that time, a system of protection