COMMUNICATIONS TO THE

We Need Programs for Chronic Airway Obstruction!

To the Editor:

It is well known that our nation's most rapidly growing health problem is chronic respiratory disease—most notably, emphysema and chronic bronchitis. Frequently published statistics document the magnitude of this problem. For example, in the past 15 years new case identification, morbidity and mortality have doubled during each five year period for emphysema and chronic bronchitis together.

This disease spectrum constitutes the second highest cause of social security disability payments which amount to some 100 million dollars a year in the form of direct benefits paid to the patients unable to work because of disabling symptoms. It has been further estimated that more than 81,000,000 productive man hours are lost each year from chronic bronchitis alone. Each year other chronic respiratory disorders (including emphysema) cost more than 170,000,000 hours lost in productive activity or recreation. This is a rough estimate of the social impact of this important disease spectrum. The magnitude of the total problem remains unknown but there are probably 14 million people with some degree of emphysema or bronchitis living in this country today. Many have only mild or no symptoms.

In an initial step to acknowledge and stimulate efforts concerning the problem, the Chronic Respiratory Disease Control Program was established and funded in 1966. Over approximately three and one-half years this branch has supported public education in the form of pamphlets, monographs and movies, has aided in the development of intensive respiratory care units, and helped develop and sustain out-patient rehabilitation programs which also provided training for medical and paramedical personnel. In addition the program supported community identification and care projects of a varied nature. This has all been accomplished with a very modest budget. The overall social benefit of these programs will never be known, however, unless the effects are continued.

The various pilot programs have already demonstrated the short-term effectiveness of both intensive and rehabilitative care methods and many physicians, nurses, inhalation therapist, and physical therapists have received training under the program contracts and grants. In addition, the Chronic Respiratory Disease Control Program sponsored research conferences in emphysema and related diseases such as the Aspen Emphysema Conference. Published proceedings of the conference were supported from 1965-1969.

In the face of this small but important effort, the Chronic Respiratory Disease Control Program has now been curtailed, effective June 30, 1970. Thus, today, there is no specific coordinated federal effort directed against our problem of chronic respiratory insufficiency. This seems particularly lamentable in view of the early success of the small but growing programs initiated through the assistance of the Chronic Respiratory Disease Control Program and doubly tragic when one considers the immense social and economic impact of these important diseases.

It is therefore hoped that all organizations and societies interested in furthering teaching, research, patient care activities and training in the area of chronic respiratory disease, put forth a great effort to ask the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare not only to reconsider continuation of the Chronic Respiratory Disease Control Program but also to expand the scope of this effort on a priority basis as an all-out attempt to stem the epidemic of chronic respiratory disease.

Respectfully,

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REFERENCES