

CAUSES OF CANCER

CONCLUSIVE PROOF A NECESSITY

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,—Many of the urgent and difficult problems which face those concerned with the safety of food were admirably presented in the debate on this subject in the House of Lords on June 15. Few would disagree with Lord Douglas of Barloch, and others who made the same point, that there is a pressing need both for more research and more effective safeguards.

Moreover, the specific demands made by Lady Summerskill, that the date of packing and list of ingredients should be printed on the package, are desirable, practicable and sensible.

At the same time it is surprising that a medically trained person, who spent four years of a very active political life in the Ministry of Food, could have made such ill-considered remarks concerning the harmful effects of the canning of foods. The only evidence given by Lady Summerskill for the view that canned foods were harmful was a story told to her by the late Sir Jack Drummond about a little colony of nuns in Africa whose diet consisted largely of canned foods and among whom the mortality from cancer over the years was very high.

It is a basic scientific principle that conclusions should not be drawn from insufficient data and without relevant control observations. In this case we must ask:—

1. Remembering that cancer is a common cause of death among all communities, and that the community concerned was stated to be only "a little colony", was the death rate significantly higher than expected?
2. Was the consumption of canned foods really abnormally high? What proportion of the diet was in the form of canned foods? How long were the nuns exposed to this abnormal diet? Which foodstuffs were involved?
3. What kinds of cancer did the nuns develop? Were they the kinds of cancer that are likely to have been due to chemical contamination of the food?
4. Do other communities consuming large amounts of canned food also have a high incidence of cancer?
5. Before a cause and effect relationship between the eating of canned foods and development of cancer can be established, evidence from prospective studies or from animal experiments must be provided.

The possibility that traces of inorganic substances, such as metal from the cans of canned food, have a carcinogenic effect is one of many possibilities receiving attention at the present time. The evidence at present available points much more strongly to other possibilities than to this.

The danger of this kind of statement, made in the House of Lords, is not that it is liable to cause temporary widespread alarm which is soon forgotten but that one day, when there is a real "wolf", no one will believe it.

Yours faithfully,

E. BOYLAND.

F. J. C. ROE.

F. BERGEL.

Chester Beatty Research Institute,
Institute of Cancer Research: Royal Cancer
Hospital, Fulham Road; S.W.3.

