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THE JOSEPH P. KENNEDY JR. FOUNDATION

SUITE 402

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WASHINGTON 5, D. C.

DISTRICT 7-1731

January 9, 1965

Dr. Joshua Lederberg
Chairman, Department of Genetics
Stanford University School of Medicine
300 Pasteur Drive
Palo Alto, California

Dear Doctor Lederberg:

You probably have seen a version of the enclosed press report which appeared all over the country in today's newspapers. When a Nobel Prize Winner compares "overbreeding among the less gifted classes" with nuclear war and over-population as the greatest threats to mankind, people will undoubtedly take notice. They may even credit him with knowing what he is talking about. The fact of the matter is, he does not. Dr. Shockley, a physicist, seems completely unaware that everything he advocated -- sterilization of the retarded, legalized abortion -- maybe even so-called "mercy killing" -- conflicts with everything we have learned about mental retardation in the last twenty years in basic medicine, biology, psychology and education, and where we are clearly going today and tomorrow in the field of retardation.

I am not talking about moral issues. Granting the fact that moral men can have different points of view about some of the extreme measures advocated by Dr. Shockley, it is equally a fact that current and imminent breakthroughs in the medical and behavioral sciences have made any "moral dilemmas" about sterilization, abortion and "mercy killing" obsolete. Dr. Shockley clearly hasn't read Dr. J. McV. Hunt's book which shows that most of the retarded -- up to 85 percent -- are retarded because of medical, psychological, educational and social mismanagement -- not because of "bad genes."

Even in those cases where "bad genes" may be responsible, there is hope based on scientific fact that the next generation will see radical changes in man's abilities to control the effects of his genes. You and Dr. George Beadle and other scientists have told me many times that the day is not far off when mankind may hold astounding hereditary controls in its hands.

Misinformation like this coming from the lips of a Nobel Prize Winner can do unimaginable harm to all of our efforts to prevent mental retardation and ameliorate its effects through treatment, training and education where it can't be prevented. Our work must be supported by the public; if the public believes our efforts are a waste of time or inefficient or the wrong approach -- and that sterilization, abortion and "mercy killing" is the right approach -- our support in the Congress, the Government agencies and at the grassroots level will evaporate.

The support, continuation and expansion of our programs of research training and service must not be undermined by a scientist speaking completely out of his field about a subject he knows nothing about. I urge you to write immediately to Dr. Shockley, protesting his ignorance and -- worse -- the great harm his utterances have done to the field of mental retardation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sargent Shriver". The signature is fluid and somewhat stylized, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Sargent Shriver