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DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WELFARE

TO: Medical Directors and Administrators
Hospitals for Mentally Ill and Retarded

Feb. 4, 1964

FROM: David J. Vail, M. D.
Medical Director

SUBJECT: Survey on phenothiazine side effect

I am showing below in its entirety the recent letter to me from Dr. Burtrum Schiele of the Department of Psychiatry and Neurology at the University of Minnesota Medical School. He is asking the cooperation of all of our institutions in determining whether we have any instances of a side effect of phenothiazine dosage over a long period of time which is evidently starting to be reported. Because of the change of skin color involved, these instances should be relatively easily detected. Could you please ask your nursing service to check through the wards for this complication? If you find any cases, send their names to me or, if you like, directly to Dr. Schiele so that further investigations can be made.

The text of Dr. Schiele's letter is as follows:

"January 27, 1964

"David Vail, M. D.
Centennial Building
St. Paul, Minnesota

Dear Doctor Vail:

"Does your office have any easy means to implement a survey of the Minnesota state hospital population regarding the following problem:

"A few physicians in Vancouver and also in New York have observed that chronically disturbed patients who have been receiving large amounts of phenothiazine drugs for a long period of time are possibly subject to a new complication. A very few of these people have developed a bluish, or purplish or brownish discoloration of the face. More serious is the fact that some of them seem ultimately to develop eye changes (cataract or discoloration of the outer rim of the cornea). So far only a few such people have been discovered. It is not definitely established that this phenomenon is related to the medication, but it might be. If it proves to be the case, we may need to alter some of our concepts about long continued medication. Thorazine is the drug that has been most commonly implicated, but this may be because

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Thorazine is used much more extensively than our other phenothiazine drugs.

"Such a survey should not be very time-consuming, as the dermatological changes at least could be rapidly surveyed. I recall seeing one such patient several years ago at Willmar State Hospital and one at Anoka State Hospital. At that time I was not aware of the fact that eye changes might eventually develop and patients were not examined with this in mind.

"If any such patients are found, we might be able to assemble a team of 'experts' (psychopharmacologist, dermatologist and ophthalmologist) to examine them."

DJV:rcj

cc - Dr. Burtrum C. Schiele
Department of Psychiatry and Neurology
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Dr. Carl Koutsky