The aim of epidemiological studies in Greece, as part of an international co-operative program, was to 1) examine a definite group of middle age men living under similar conditions, 2) to follow the subsequent disease experience of these men and 3) to discover possible relationships between the pre-disease characteristics and the incidence of the disease, notably cardiovascular (CVD), resulting from atherosclerosis.

This report presents data in one of the population samples in the rural area of Crete, Greece fully examined nearly 15 years ago and followed since. The island of Crete is situated in the southern part of Greece, is mountainous and is known since the Minoic civilization 4000 years ago; it is agricultural and the inhabitants are small farmers. The first study started in 1960 and covered 686 men aged 40-59 years in prescribed villages. Characteristics of the examined sample were: co-operation, stability in residence, occupation and diet, no sharp contrasts in economic standards and no sharp retirement with age. Parameters taken into consideration were: body weight, body fatness, blood pressure, physical activity, electrocardiographic findings at rest and after exercise, serum cholesterol, smoking habits, lung function and diet.

Entry and follow-up data have shown that prevalence and incidence of overweight and obesity are low; with a subcutaneous fat thickness of 5 mm, less than 3% of the Cretans are obese. Hypertension is also less frequent particularly for men over 50 years of age; 12% of the men had high blood pressure greater than 150/90 mm Hg.
In regard to serum cholesterol, men in Crete had a low cholesterol with a mean value of 202 mg per 100 ml. More than 93% of the people are physically very active with a sustained endurance type of habitual activity; this results from the fact that agriculture is underdeveloped and work is arduous due to the lack of mechanized farming. People are poor peasants and small land-owners, who walk daily long distances to work.

In regard to smoking habits people tend to smoke rather heavily and more than one-third of them smoke more than 20 cigarettes daily.

The diet of this population is of special interest, since it is simple and plain although nutritionally good; it is remarkable for being high in total fats exclusively arriving from olive oil which provides more than one-third of the daily calories, but very low in animal fats; saturated fatty acids provide about 8% of dietary calories. Intake of animal proteins also is low. The daily caloric intake of 2750 calories consists mainly of bread, pulses, vegetables, potatoes, olives, olive oil and fruits in varying proportions around the year, but without considerable seasonal differences.

Morbidity and mortality from CVD is low and cases of myocardial infarction and angina pectoris are rare in a population aged now 54 to 73 years. During the 14-year period of follow-up 5 people died from coronary heart disease and another 5 from cerebral vascular accidents, an incidence of 5.2 per year per 10,000. Peripheral arterial diseases are practically nonexistent. Total all-causes death rate reflects the low death rate from CVD with the result to be lower, in the order of 64 cases per year per 10,000.

From the presented data one can conclude that CVD, a sequela of atherosclerosis, is rare among the farmers in Crete and in comparison with many other Western countries.

Whatever mechanisms may account for the remarkably low prevalence and incidence of CVD among Cretans, there is no question that their way of life and habits of eating act probably as very important factors in keeping these people free of risk factors and thus relatively "immune" from the number one killing diseases of today, i.e., atherosclerotic cardiovascular diseases.