

Research into Link Between Bacteria and Cancer in Aklavik

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NADIRA BAGG, CBC: Last week on Northbeat we told you about a major medical research project that was set to happen in the community of Aklavik. This week, a half a dozen of the top gastrointestinal specialists are there hoping to learn more about a possible link between a bacteria and high rates of stomach cancer in the community. Joining me by phone from the health centre in Aklavik in Dr. Bob Bailey and Dr. John Morse. Dr. Bailey, Dr. Morse, you must be very busy, so thank you both for talking with me. I'm going to start with Dr. Morse. Can you tell me about where you are with the project?

MORSE: We arrived on Sunday and we've been here for three full days. We've been able to examine 130 people, men and women ages 10 to 72. We've had excellent feedback in our questionnaire afterwards. People tolerated the procedure well and were very satisfied with what they experienced. So we've been able to collect samples from all those people and, of course, we're hoping that over the next two days we're going to get a similar or even better turnout.

CBC: And Dr. Bailey, the community of Aklavik wanted this to happen in the community. Can you tell us about the response?

BAILEY: Absolutely; I'd be pleased to do so. You mentioned that the community wanted this to happen. Over the years, if I can expand a little bit, they recognized that there was a lot of abdominal discomfort and that there were more people with cancer in the community than might be expected, and in fact it was the doctors in Inuvik and Dr. John Morse and so on who picked that up over the years. And so the people here really were looking forward to us and in fact working with all of us, the local docs and nurses and those of us who came in from out of town, to help them. So are they pleased and happy with it? You be sure that they are. They recognize that they're not all going to have cancer, but if there's one thing that's fixable along the road towards cancer of the stomach it's helicobacter. Sure, there are other factors, genetic and so on, but they, the people in this community, are very up to date, very knowledgeable, know what's going on, and they want us to look for helicobacter in them and they want us to eradicate it in each and every individual if and when we find it. And we're doing a neat thing here. This is a world first. Nowhere in the world have a group of docs ever come in at the request of the community to sort out a problem like this. And then on top of it, if I can

expand a little bit more, we're taking these samples back to Edmonton and we're going to grow the bacteria and we're going to check to see which antibiotics would be the best to use against the bacteria, and we're going to develop individual prescriptions, if you like, which is a little different than what's done anywhere else, and then we're going to bring that news back here to the health care centres and the local doctors and we're going to come back and see if we can't do a number on helicobacter.

CBC: And Dr. Morse, as Dr. Bailey mentioned, you still have to carry out tests and once you leave Aklavik, you'll be heading to Edmonton with these. Are you able to provide any results at this time?

MORSE: Ah, no. No, we're not going to treat anybody right away with antibiotics. We have identified some people who have some no cancers but some people with ulcers, and those, of course, are being treated as anybody else if they come with health issues to any doctor. So those people are going to be helped. But the antibiotic treatment is going to wait until we have the results of the lab tests on the helicobacter and make sure that we give the optimum treatment for the germs that each person has.

CBC: So, Dr. Bailey, are you seeing any results at this time and are there any numbers that are surprising you?

BAILEY: No surprises. I mean a very pleasant bit of information. What you've just heard from Dr. Morse is we've looked at 130 people so far and nobody has malignancy, so isn't that nice. And the other thing that again we're not surprised but we didn't know about it is the patients are not unhappy and not distressed with having this test done. And if I could, I'll tell you a little bit about this because again it's a world first. The endoscopes that we're using to look in the stomach and take our samples go through the nose. They're very small -- a little bit bigger than a piece of spaghetti -- and although they're available in Canada, there are only two or three of these endoscopes around so far in Canada; not many. And we have...Boy, I don't know how many scopes we have here; probably in the neighbourhood of 20 or 30 scopes of this very special kind that we're using here. So it's not a surprise but it's such a thrill to be able to bring that technology to Aklavik and to be able to use it, and we're learning ourselves that, boy, this is good technique and this particular approach to specific problem medicine works so well. Other surprises, I don't think there are any other surprises. There's a lot of helicobacter. We're also doing breath tests and at the moment, although it's preliminary, it looks at least 30 percent of the population have helicobacter.

CBC: Dr. Bailey and Dr. Morse, thank you both very much talking with me today.

BAILEY: Well, you're more than welcome.

MORSE: Bye.