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Investigating the cause of stomach cancer in Aklavik

When Aklavik residents noted that too many deaths from stomach cancer were occurring in their community, they asked to have the situation investigated. What resulted was a ground-breaking cancer research initiative. In February, a team of 25 physicians, nurses and technicians visited Aklavik to examine more than 200 residents.

Using several endoscopy units provided free of charge by manufacturer Olympus, researchers are investigating why Aklavik residents have a higher rate of infection of the helicobacter pylori (*H. pylori*) bacteria which is a leading cause of stomach ulcers and cancer. The ultra fine scopes go through a person's nostril -- rather than down the throat -- allowing doctors to perform the procedures quickly and with only a local anesthetic.

Biopsies were collected at the same time using the Olympus scopes and samples were couriered to Edmonton daily. Back in the lab, cultures are being grown to find the best way to kill the bacteria.

"This is a more than \$1-million project not including the labour," said Dr. Bob Bailey, executive director of the Northern Health Services Network in Alberta. "If ever there was a true medical partnership, this is it." Much of the team was comprised of doctors and nurses from hospitals and organizations in Edmonton, including Canadian Digestive Health Foundation president, Dr. Richard Fedorak.

While the final results of the work will be a couple of months in coming, Dr. Sander Van Zanten, one of the team leaders and a gastro-neurology specialist, said they've already made some initial findings. "We know about 55 per cent of the people we've seen have the *H. pylori* bacteria," he said. "The national average is only about 20 per cent." Dr. Van Zanten went on to explain that approximately one per cent of people infected with *H. pylori* actually develop cancer, while about five to 15 per cent end up with stomach ulcers."

Dr. Van Zanten said the current approach to treat

someone with infected H. pylori involves using two separate antibiotics in combination with a proton pump inhibitor. However, the antibiotics commonly used in the rest of Canada weren't having much effect in Aklavik.

After researchers in Alberta spend the next two months or so pouring over the Aklavik samples, the team expects to be able to offer some advice to residents including which antibiotics will be effective for this community.

This project is an example compassionate individuals working together to advance important digestive disease research – research that will lead to new discoveries that will help save lives.

