



## 2008 Features

### Team heads north to scope for stomach cancer-causing bacteria

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#### *Goal is to scope all of Aklavik, NWT's adult population*

It's unusual for Registered Nurse Rachel Munday to be a patient, but she was more than willing to switch roles when physicians and nurses came to Aklavik, NWT from Capital Health in Edmonton and the Stanton Health Region in Yellowknife.



The team of 25 people arrived in the hamlet of about 600 people on Sunday. The Susie Husky Health Centre, a nursing station which serves the community on a daily basis, has been transformed into a series of endoscopy suites.

The community has asked for help determining the cause of stomach cancer which is higher in Aklavik than in other NWT communities. Minuscule biopsies from throughout the stomach are being taken and flown back to Edmonton daily to be tested for the *Helicobacter Pylori* bacteria, a potential precursor to stomach cancer.

Olympus Canada has contributed a new type of scope for the project and the Aklavik project is the largest trial to date. The scopes, which are inserted through the nostril, are smaller than a piece of macaroni but a bit bigger than a piece of spaghetti. The patients require temporary freezing of the throat and nose but no other sedative.



"It feels funny but it's a quick and painless procedure," says Munday.

She was one of the first people to have the procedure done and dozens of residents have streamed into the Health Centre to have the test done. The goal is to scope the entire adult population of about 300.

"This is not a bunch of researchers riding into town saying we need samples. This is a team of doctors, nurses and aides saying 'how can we help?'," says Dr. R.J. Bailey, one of six physicians involved in the project and the medical director for Capital Health's Northern Health Services Network (NHSN).

"We are responding to the community's plea for help. The Aklavik Health Committee has been planning this for years and it's tremendous that a community has come together to ask for help in determining how they can better care for their own health. This is a world-class operation and a world-first. Never before has a team gone into an isolated community and performed scoping on such large scale," he says.

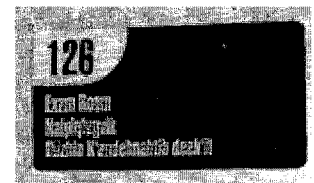
The samples are being tested for the bacteria and those who test positive will be put on a course of medications which can completely eradicate it. The researchers will follow the success of the protocol and the project in Aklavik may become the template used in other communities in the NWT.

Aklavik mayor Knute Hansen fully supports the initiative and says only good can come of it.

"It's important that our community get tested to see if we can determine what is causing the high incidence of stomach cancer. Once we find community members with the bacteria we can treat it. Right now we don't know all of the causes, but if *H. pylori* is a factor, we're taking the steps to improve our health.

Aklavik is about 100 kilometers south of the Beaufort Sea and can only be accessed by air in the summer and via air or ice-road in the winter. The team, which includes an epidemiologist and researchers from the University of Alberta, are staying either with families, in the nurses' residence or in the lone Bed and Breakfast.

"The community has welcomed us with open arms and we are thrilled to be here. We have enjoyed local delicacies such as caribou stew and muktuk (whale blubber) and some of the children from the community put on a dance for us and we all joined in," says Bailey.



The team wraps up scoping late Friday and returns south on Saturday. Partners in the project include the Aklavik Health Centre, Arctic Health Research Network, the Government of the Northwest Territories Department of Health and Social Services (Stanton Territorial Hospital), Beaufort-Delta Health and Social Services Authority, Capital Health, the University of Alberta, Public Health Agency of Canada and Olympus Canada.