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Aklavik scoped for stomach cancer

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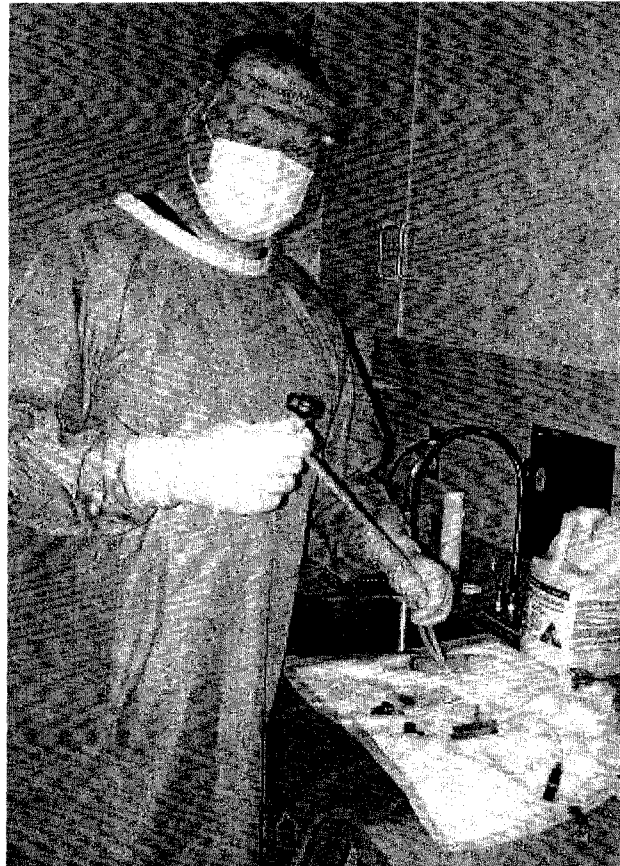
AKLAVIK - The Susie Husky Health Centre in Aklavik was the scene of ground-breaking cancer research as a team of 25 physicians, nurses and technicians visited to examine hundreds of residents.

The 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.

One of the first volunteers for an examination was Rachel Munday, nurse in charge of the centre, who has lived in the community for three years.

"It's going very well," she said on Wednesday. "We've already had about 110 people come through and we're hoping for more than 200 by the end of the week."

The researchers are using several endoscopy units provided free of charge by manufacturer Olympus. These 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.



Austin Babb, an endoscopy aide from Capital Health in Edmonton, cleans the delicate equipment donated for the project by Olympus. - photo courtesy of Karen Karbashewski

For Munday, the entire experience was fascinating - especially being scoped.

"A lot of people have described it as a weird feeling and I'd have to agree with that," she said. "It isn't painful at all."

Biopsies were also collected using the scopes and the samples were sent by courier to Edmonton daily. The other members of the team are growing cultures to find the best way to kill the bacteria.

"This bug is hard to grow in a lab," said Dr. John Morse, who normally works out of Yellowknife's Stanton Territorial Hospital.

What makes the entire effort so special in Munday's view is that the community requested it.

"Aklavik residents noticed some time ago that they had many deaths attributed to stomach cancer," she said. She added the Aklavik Health Committee worked hard to ensure everything went smoothly.

"They went around and promoted what was going to happen and ensured everything was carried out in a way that was appropriate and in accordance with the views of the community. They did a great job."

Much of the team was comprised of doctors and nurses from hospitals and organizations in Edmonton.

"This is a more than \$1 million project not including the labour," said Dr. Bob Bailey, executive director of the Northern Health Services Network. "If ever there was a true medical partnership, this is it."

He said he thinks the experience in Aklavik could be used as a model for further research into H. pylori, adding there are other communities in the North already starting to ask for similar visits.

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 gastroenterology 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."

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, he added.

"So far we haven't seen any cases of cancer," he said.

He said the current approach to treat someone infected with H. pylori involves using two separate antibiotics in combination with a proton pump inhibitor.

"The antibiotics we commonly use in the rest of Canada weren't having much effect here," said Van Zanten.

After researchers in Alberta spend the next two months or so pouring over the Aklavik samples, he said he expects to be able to offer some advice to residents.

"For the entire community, we'll be able to say which antibiotics are going to work," he said.

