

Stanton docs assist in Aklavik

Team investigates higher rates of stomach cancer, ulcers

by John Curran

Northern News Services

Stanton Territorial Hospital had to make do with two fewer doctors last week as Dr. John Morse and Dr. Tom Guzowski were making a long distance house call to Aklavik.

The pair were part of a 25-person team investigating why residents in the Beauport-Delta community have a higher rate of stomach cancer and the helicobacter pylori (*H. pylori*) bacteria, which is a leading cause of stomach ulcers and cancer.

"I've been a doctor for more than 30 years, but this trip is an important part of my career," said Morse. "I feel privileged to be participating."

In the 1990s, the community started asking health professionals why stomach cancer was so prevalent among residents, he said, adding the world-class team of physicians, nurses and others there now are finally going to get to

Dr. John Morse, left, and Dr. Tom Guzowski, both of Stanton Territorial Hospital, spent last week in Aklavik on the team investigating why stomach cancer is more prevalent in the North and in that community in particular.

photo courtesy of Karen Karbasheski

the bottom of it.

"The community has been patient, but it's finally happening," he said. "People are lining up to get in the health centre to be tested and they're not even sick."

The project aims to examine more than 200 residents during the week, with some 110-plus subjects already taking part as of midday Wednesday.

"From initial testing ... we know about 55 per cent of the people we've seen have the *H. pylori* bacteria," said Dr.



Sander Van Zanten, one of the team leaders and a gastro-neurology specialist who has lived in Edmonton for the past 18 months. "The national average is only about 20 per cent."

Approximately one per cent of people infected with

H. pylori develop cancer, while five to 15 per cent end up with stomach ulcers, he added.

Volunteers are examined using one of 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.

No cancer so far

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

Biopsies are also collected using the scopes and the samples are couriered to Edmonton daily.

There researchers are growing cultures to find the best way to kill the bacteria.

"This bug is hard to grow in a lab," said Morse.

He said the current approach to treat someone with infected 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 affect here," said Van Zanten.

After researchers in Alberta spend the next two months or so poring 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.