

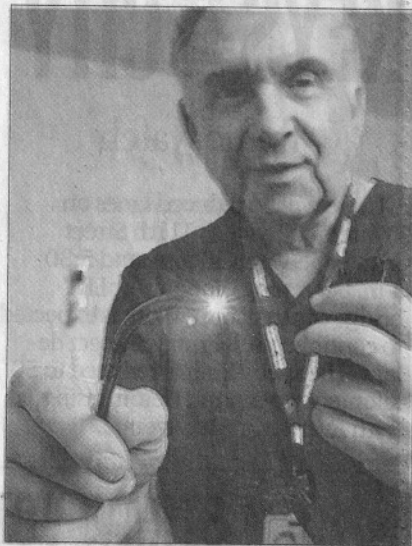
Call for help

Capital Health experts arrive, searching for answers as N.W.T. hamlet of Aklavik deals with high rate of stomach cancer

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This week, more than 200 people from Aklavik, N.W.T., have filed into the local nursing station to have a narrow tube snaked up their noses and a biopsy taken of their stomachs.

The experience was uncomfortable, said Mayor Knute Hansen of his own test, but well worth it since the hamlet wants to figure out how to prevent stomach cancer, which has hit the isolated island much harder than other northern towns. Between 1992 and 2000, the Northwest Territories government recorded 27 cases of stomach cancer in the territories, of which eight were centred in Aklavik, said Dr. John Morse, an internist at Stanton Territorial Hospital in Yellowknife.



TERRY HALIFAX

Dr. Bob Bailey, executive director of the Northern Health Services Network, shows off a light scope used to help detect stomach cancer.

In the early 1990s, Morse began noticing that people from Aklavik, located about 100 kilometres south of the Beaufort Sea, frequently had stomach complaints.

Many tested positive for helicobacter pylori bacteria, which can cause stomach cancer and ulcers.

Even after the patients were given antibiotics and an acid-suppressing medication that typically gets rid of the bacteria, many still had pain.

Other people in their 20s and early 30s were diagnosed with stomach cancer.

"It wasn't dozens of patients, but certainly more than you'd expect from a small community," Morse said of the hamlet of about 600 people.

"It's not people at the end of their life getting stomach cancer, which tends to be the situation you would see in Alberta or Edmonton.

"We are seeing people in the prime of their life. In a community like this, when a young mom or a young father in the prime of their life get sick, everybody is aware of it. People get concerned about things."

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CITY PLUS

55 per cent of people tested positive for bacteria

HELP

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The concern led to action this week as a team of 25 doctors, nurses and technicians descended on Aklavik to test every adult for the presence of the bacteria in their stomachs. Most of the team members are from Capital Health, which has a formal agreement with the governments of the Northwest and Nunavut territories to provide health services in isolated communities that don't have the population base to attract medical experts.

So far, more than 200 people have had their noses frozen and a scope snaked down the back of their throats to cut tiny tissue samples from the walls of their stomachs. That tissue was sent back to Edmonton for further testing and research.

But already, preliminary results from simple breath tests show that 55 per cent of people tested positive for the helicobacter pylori bacteria. In a typical population, only 20 per cent test positive.

No cancers, but some duodenal and gastric ulcers were found and treated.

Mayor Hansen received one of the many positive results for the bacteria.

"It was quite upsetting because never in my wildest dreams did I think I was positive," said Hansen, 55, who has never had stomach problems. Only one per cent of people who test positive for the bacteria develop cancer, while five to 15 per cent end up with ulcers.

Aklavik's head nurse, Rachel Munday, said people don't have to worry about testing positive but should pay attention to stomach pain.

"It's a reminder that they do need to jump in and not just think it's indigestion," Munday said. "It's good preventative health."

Hansen is now content to wait two months while researchers in Edmonton grow the bacteria, then find the best concoction of antibiotics to cure it.

"If we can prevent stomach cancer — stomach cancer is a very serious type of cancer — we could prevent premature death," Morse said.

Dr. Bob Bailey, executive director of the Northern Health Services Network, said the \$1-million scoping project is the first in the world.

"Nowhere in the world ever has any team gone into a small community at the community's request (to test the entire adult population)," said Bailey, a gastroenterologist whose office is at the Royal Alexandra Hospital.

When he visited the northern hamlet more than a year ago, an elder pointed across the road to one of three cemeteries and said, "Help us. Our perception is we're dying here. Look at the cemeteries."

Bailey said genetics could be one factor in the high cancer rates. A 2003 publication by the Northwest Territories government said preserved, smoked, pickled or salted foods may also increase risk for stomach cancer.

"When the distress came from the community and was recognized by the doctors on site, then we said we can do something here."

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