

## Looking for medical answers

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Northern News Services

Published Monday, November 15, 2010

AKLAVIK - Cancer has taken so many of Billy Archie's relatives and friends that he can't stop looking for answers.

The former mayor of Aklavik brought the community's health committee back to life when Aklavik residents began reporting outrageously high rates of stomach cancer, and he helped bring in university researchers to study the H. Pylori bacterium that infected hundreds in the hamlet, optimistic that they would find the cause.

Billy Archie, a former mayor of Aklavik and vice-chair of the hamlet's health committee, remains committed to improving the health of his community. - Katie May/NNSL photo

This year, University of Alberta researchers have reported back that 70 per cent of residents who were treated with antibiotics in 2008 no longer have the stomach cancer-causing bacteria. But they still don't know exactly how it got there in the first place, and Archie's optimism is dampened by the recent loss of his cousin, who died of cancer last month in his 30s. UofA researchers are scheduled to come back to Aklavik to give the community an H. Pylori update the week of Nov. 21, after they finish sampling residents of nearby Old Crow, Yukon, who have also been struck with high rates of cancer.

"It's so visible when you're in a small, isolated community. It's people you know that pass on and are getting sick and it's like, what's going on here?" Archie said. "We're not pinpointing the source. If it's the water, people are going to get re-infected. So let's pinpoint the source."

Archie, who runs his own independent contracting firm in Aklavik, was elected mayor in 2004 and was one of the founding directors of the Institute for Circumpolar Health Research the next year. He stepped back into the mayoral race last December, focusing his ultimately unsuccessful campaign on health awareness and the continuation of H. Pylori research in the community.

"I'm not that leader that's going to stand up and yell until I'm blue in the face about health issues in the community. I'll bring in researchers to do studies and then hand in the report," he said. "Then you've got a document to say, 'here, minister of health. Here, Health Canada. You've got a responsibility here.'"

Archie did acknowledge that many of the nearly 200 people who were treated for the bacteria are now feeling better, although it remains to be seen whether the antibiotics will be an effective cure.

"There were some improvements - one of my friends said, 'Boy, I feel so much better afterwards. I don't have heart burn anymore,' so even the quality of living is improved," he said.

There are no available rates of cancer specific to Aklavik, but Archie said about 100 people out of the total population of 600 suffer from a chronic disease.

"Losing so many of your relatives to cancer and other ailments - it's always going to be an issue," he said, emphasizing that health professionals, parents, teachers, and the community as a whole have a responsibility to encourage balanced nutrition and active lifestyles among today's children.

"It's change of lifestyle and change of diet from our parents' generation when they were so independent - healthy and wealthy on the land - versus now where everybody's stuck in the community."