

Why more stomach cancer in Aklavik, NWT?

Researchers want to learn why the Northwest Territories community appears to have high rates of stomach cancer and treat the bacteria that may cause cancer to develop.

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The Susie Husky Health Centre in Aklavik, a community in the Northwest Territories, was the scene of ground-breaking cancer research as a team of 25 physicians, nurses and technicians visited to examine hundreds of residents, reports the Northern News Service.

They want to know 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.

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.

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

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, told the NNS. "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 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.

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.