

Natives stranded as Northern hospital shuts doors

SIoux LOOKOUT, Ont. (CP) - A hospital in northwestern Ontario that serves 16,000 mainly First Nations people in 28 outlying communities has closed its doors to new patients due to a doctor shortage.

The hospital in Sioux Lookout, northwest of Thunder Bay, is now sending patients to an already crowded hospital in the community, while pregnant women are being flown to Winnipeg or Thunder Bay.

The contract covering the doctors expired on Tuesday.

"Measures will be in effect at Health Canada until we can recruit and retain the required number of physicians," said Donna Barnaby, a Health Canada spokeswoman.

Only two of the four doctors now on staff at the hospital are committed to staying. The hospital needs 14 general practitioners and four specialists.

The doctors turned down a new contract offered by Health Canada on June 4 after a lawyer called it incomplete and recommended against it.

Dr. Joe Dooley, the hospital's medical director, said the contract contained no safeguards in terms of workload.

There was a sense that the work-

load could expand and there was no real sense of what happened when there were shortages in staffing, m said Dooley.

Dr. Claudette Chase will be leaving Sioux Lookout. Chase had been a nurse-practitioner in the area before going to medical school. For the past six months, she has been working 60 to 80 hours per week at the Sioux Lookout hospital.

"I am exhausted," Chase said. "Most of us who have been through the last six months are fairly burnt out."

The University of Toronto had been contracted to supply and pay the doctors. About half the money came from the federal government, the other half was to come from Ontario Health Insurance Plan billings.

However, the University lost about \$500,000 in the 1996-97 fiscal year because of a shortfall in OHIP billings and wanted a guarantee Ottawa would cover any future losses.

"No university is going to take the financial risk," said Arnie Aberman, dean of medicine at the school.

Hamilton's McMaster University is one of the groups that Health Canada is now talking to about taking the contract.

"The thing is that they want the same guarantee we wanted," said Aberman. "I suspect that the federal government may give them the guarantee they wouldn't give to us."

"They found out that anyone who goes there is going to want this guarantee."

Chief Stan Beardy of the Muskrat Dam First Nation said he believes

the hospital may be forced to maintain its reduced levels of service until September.

"We're still talking to McMaster, but we're still several weeks away," said Beardy, who is chairman of a committee of chiefs affected by the hospital closing.

Medical services for aboriginal people are part of their treaty rights. The federal government is

required to supply health care but are not fulfilling their part of the treaties, Beardy said.

For Chase, though, it's not about financial risk and treaty rights.

"I love rural medicine and I really have learned a lot working with First Nations people and would like to keep doing that, but it probably won't be in this area for a while," said Chase.