

# Fire erupts over National Chief's

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Atlantic chiefs shared the view that Coon Come's comments perpetuated a stereotypical views of alcoholic Indians.

Chief Lawrence Paul of the Millbrook reserve, N.S. fielded several calls from angry chiefs. "It's tough enough to fight the stereotype of the drunken Indian without having our national chief coming out and saying things that aren't true," said Paul. Chief Paul admitted that alcohol abuse by native leaders was a problem years ago. "There was a time in the late '60s to the mid '70s (when) there was a lot of partying going on. We used to party a lot...but that was in the past and has been corrected."

Six Nations Chief Wellington Staats also admitted that alcohol was a problem in the past. "Twenty or 30 years ago you would see leaders show up at a meeting and then an hour later they would be in the bar, but that is not the situation today," said Staats in a press release. The release went on to say that Staats now believes most Ontario Chiefs drink responsibly. "The leadership and the people that I know are responsible and committed to their communities," he said.

Coon Come's speech echoed delegates concerns at the

conference but did not cause the same explosive reaction inside as outside. "Our people smoke too much and drink too much," Coon Come told the health conference delegates. He cited examples of First Nations with high suicide rates, infant mortality rates, and water contamination problems.

Coon Come told the delegates, "Brothers and sisters, I am not going to go on with these statistics. Non of you would be here if you don't already know." He added that health issues are primarily the responsibility of First Nations. "We are the ones who have to do something. We must act. These are our lives, our children, our parents and elders who are sick and dying and in pain."

Chief Staats agreed in a broad sense with the National Chief's comments. "I agree with Matthew on that issue...I agree with him that alcohol on a lot of First Nations is a problem and it's the parents who are responsible and have to show some responsibility first, before it can filter down to the child." Staats also agreed with Coon Come's statement that aboriginal health was in crisis but countered that is was "not because of any kind of abuse, its because we don't have enough money to fund First Nations adequately."

The AFN's communications office was busy with dam-

age control and Coon Come later clarified his words to the media. "In response to a reporter's questions...I stated that participants had mentioned that the leaders had to become role models by not promoting drinking and smoking."

Two days later his office issued these statements. "As leaders, we must ensure that we provide a role model and pass on to our youth a strong and positive image," stated Coon Come.

However the National Chiefs alcohol comments served to overshadow statements made about First Nations unity inside the health conference.