

AFN calls for special prescription drug abuse task force

OTTAWA (CP) - Prescription drug abuse by aboriginals and other Canadians should be tackled by a special task force, the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations said Thursday.

Phil Fontaine wants such a task force to include aboriginals, the drug industry, doctors and the federal government.

This is a very serious problem which is not exclusive to First Nations peoples, Fontaine said in a release.

"All First Nations peoples must not be unfairly stigmatized or singled out for a problem that is prevalent within other state run

drug programs," he said.

Fontaine's statement follows remarks by a senior Health Canada official earlier this week who said drug programs for aboriginals are being defrauded by abusers and traffickers.

Jay Wortman told the Toronto Star Tuesday it's impossible to define how large the problem is. But that programs available to 656,000 aboriginals have been easily tapped for painkillers, tranquilizers and other drugs.

He said the department wants to target doctors and pharmacists who overprescribe drugs and fraudulently bill the government.

Ottawa spends more than \$180 million a year on prescription and other drugs for aboriginals.

Fontaine's call for a task force mirrors a recommendation made by the federal Auditor-General about the problem in his 1997 report.

The report noted that over a three month period, 15,000 people had prescriptions filled at three or more pharmacies and that another 1,600 obtained more than 15 different drugs.

Fontaine said any crack down on the problem shouldn't lead to cuts to federal aboriginal programs.

"We would stress that . . . aboriginal and human rights to quality health care are not negatively affected."

Health Canada audits for patterns which could pinpoint doctors, pharmacists and patients who are abusing the system.

A recent crackdown in Alberta resulted in a 25 per cent reduction in the dispensing of anti-anxiety drugs and a 20 per cent drop in dispensing of painkillers.

Action has also been taken against doctors and pharmacists in Manitoba.