

Remote First Nation communities face medical crisis

By Jenn Goddu

TORONTO (CP) - Aboriginals in an area one-third the size of Ontario are angry with Ottawa over a severe doctor shortage that has reduced them to being diagnosed by telephone.

"If we had a hospital I'd probably be sick - that's how sick I am about it," said Donny Morris, Chief of Kitchenuhmaykoosib First Nation, formerly Big Trout Lake.

But one doctor willing to help out said he was stymied by red tape from Health Canada.

Dr. Gary Goldthorpe, an anesthetist from Trenton, Ont., said he spent three frustrating months trying to firm up a contract to work in Sioux Lookout this summer before accepting work in Baffin Island.

"It means that the long-term preventive side of medicine will suffer and they'll just have to cope with emergencies," said

Goldthorpe, who was director of Zone Hospital in Sioux Lookout from 1971-78.

But the emergency room at the hospital has been closed since July 1, aggravating the medical crisis facing the 18,000 people in 28 isolated northwestern Ontario communities.

Health Canada spokeswoman Donna Barnaby conceded the situation is serious.

"It's an urgent situation, a crisis situation which is being managed," she said.

Under a contract with the University of Toronto that expired June 30, 18 doctors visited patients throughout the region. Now only seven doctors are on short-term contracts providing consultation around the clock to 19 nursing stations.

Barnaby said negotiations are under way with Hamilton's McMaster University to fully staff

the 385,000 square kilometre area.

"The clients have been looked after," she said.

The patients aren't so sure.

With doctors unable to visit the remote communities - 25 of which can only be reached by air - patients needing medical attention must be flown more than 400 kilometres to Thunder Bay, Ont., or Winnipeg.

"They're making (us) more isolated," Morris said.

Chief Corny Nate of Fort Hope First Nation said his community relies on three nurses, and health care is suffering.

"The nurses are having a hard time, although they do the best they can," said Nate, a member of a First Nation Chiefs' committee dealing with the crisis.

He blamed Health Canada for being inflexible in funding talks that led the U of T to pull out.

"They have been playing

hardball in the last year and they knew the situation was going to end up this way," he said.

But Barnaby said Health Canada is only one of the negotiating parties - the provincial health ministry, McMaster, First Nations communities and physicians are also involved.

Nurses and doctors in the region contacted by the Canadian Press said they had been instructed to refer all information requests to Health Canada.

Barnaby denied any such directive had been issued but said,

"There's been a lot of negative press around the situation at Sioux Lookout which makes it extremely difficult to recruit (doctors)."

Dr. Harry Bain developed the medical program in 1969 to make health care accessible to the aboriginal people.

"It hits you right in the solar plexus to see the thing falling apart because it was a good program," said Bain, who is now retired.

"Somebody will have to pick up the pieces."