

TB rates sharply higher among natives

New figures show disease has spiked in aboriginal communities while declining in non-aboriginal populations

BY BILL CURRY OTTAWA

It's been more than 100 years since Peter Bryce, former chief medical officer at Indian Affairs, sounded the alarm over shockingly high rates of deadly tuberculosis in government-funded Indian residential schools.

Now, a century later, TB continues to be a major concern in aboriginal communities. A new federal report reveals the TB rate among status Indians to be 31 times higher than that of non-aboriginal Canadians. Among the most susceptible of aboriginal populations are the Inuit, for whom the TB rate is 186 times that of Canadian-born non-aboriginals.

The new data from the Public Health Agency of Canada come as Prime Minister Stephen Harper is preparing to put child and maternal health in the developing world at the top of the agenda when he hosts the G8 summit later this year.

Inuit and first nations leaders say the visitors should know that Canada's aborigi-

TB RATES

Cases of tuberculosis infection per 100,000 people, 2008:

National	4.8
Canadian-born	2.1
Foreign-born	13.4
Canadian-born non-aboriginal	0.8
Méfis	8.0
North American Indian (status + non-status)	27.8
Inuit	157.5

Source: Public Health Agency of Canada

als are battling a preventable disease as a result of overcrowding in mouldy homes. Inuit housing and social services are almost entirely reliant on transfer money from the federal government.

"I think they'll be interested to see we've got Third World conditions here in Canada," said Angus Toulouse, the Ontario regional chief for the Assembly of First Nations who is responsible for health issues.

Gail Turner, the chair of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's national Inuit committee on health, said there is a clear link between the child health problems on the G8 agenda and TB among the Inuit.

"We have the highest birth rate in Canada," she said. "Currently in the Inuit regions, we have some quite alarming statistics around rates of infant mortality, some of our birth outcomes and, in particular, our rates of respiratory illnesses in young children. And all of these can feed very naturally into TB."

Ms. Turner said the new figures are significant because it has been very difficult to obtain clear statistics on TB rates among the Inuit population. The health agency data are part of a preliminary release of information in advance of a larger report on tuberculosis in Canada.

Tuberculosis is a contagious infectious disease that enters the body through breathing and settles in the lungs. It can then spread through the central nervous system, infecting

bones and joints.

The disease is entirely curable by taking prescription medication for several months, according to the Canadian Lung Association, which describes TB as a worldwide epidemic that kills two million people annually.

The data reveal TB rates among non-aboriginal Canadians have decreased from one per 100,000 in 2003 to 0.8 per 100,000 in 2008, yet rates for aboriginals are climbing. The increase is particularly dramatic among Inuit, for whom the rate climbed from 22.1 cases per 100,000 in 2003 to 157.5 cases per 100,000 in 2008.

An earlier report from the Public Health Agency of Canada indicated that 8 per cent of Canadians diagnosed with TB in 2007 died before or during treatment.

Federal Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq, the first Inuk to be sworn into the federal cabinet, told reporters yesterday her government is working with the provinces and territories to curb the spread of the disease among aboriginals.

Dr. Bryce penned a damning diatribe against the federal government's indifference to TB rates in the schools, titled *The Story of a National Crime*, after Ottawa terminated his position and shelved his reports.

A 2007 *Globe and Mail* examination of National Archives material revealed that officials continued to warn Ottawa about high TB death rates in residential schools for at least four decades after Dr. Bryce penned his first report on the situation in 1907.

The *Globe* uncovered one caustic letter sent in 1937 to Indian Affairs by physician D.F. MacInnis on the state of the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School in Nova Scotia. "Evidently somebody has mistaken our residential school for a TB sanatorium," he wrote.

New Democratic MP Judy Wasylycia-Leis submitted a request yesterday to House of Commons Speaker Peter Milliken asking for an emergency debate on the TB findings. The request was declined.