

Off-reserve Aboriginal people face daunting health problems: StatsCan

The national chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples is “pleasantly surprised” by a new Statistics Canada survey dealing with the health of off-reserve Aboriginal people, but it’s not the results that surprised Chief Dwight Dorey — it’s the fact that the study was done. Although 800 000 Aboriginal Canadians live off reserves and only 230 000 live on

them, Dorey said it is the latter population that is usually studied. His group represents off-reserve Indians and Métis people living across Canada.

The 2000/01 Canadian Community Health Survey, *The Health of the Off-reserve Aboriginal Population*, found that natives living away from reserves are more likely to have chronic health conditions and long-term restrictions on their activity levels than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. They are also more likely to be depressed.

The survey determined that 60.1% of off-reserve natives reported having at least 1 chronic condition, compared with 49.6% of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The 3 most prevalent conditions were arthritis (26.4%), hypertension (15.4%) and diabetes (8.7%), with diabetes being twice as common as in the non-Aboriginal population; 23.1% of off-reserve Aboriginal people perceived their health as being only fair or poor, a rate 1.9 times higher than in the non-Aboriginal population.

The survey also looked at health determinants and found that the off-reserve population had lower levels of education (43.9% of respondents had not graduated from high school, compared with 23.1% of non-Aboriginal Canadians) and income. More of them smoked (51.4% vs.

26.5%), were obese (24.7% vs. 14.0%) and were heavy drinkers (22.6% vs. 16.1%). On the positive side, more had quit drinking alcohol (22.7% vs. 11.9%).

Aboriginals living on reserves have concerns similar to those living off them: 8% of men have diabetes, and 44% of people live below the poverty line.

Dorey speculates that “a culture of despair” may be at the root of some of his community’s difficulties. Part of the problem, he said, is that governments do not accept responsibility for off-reserve native people. “In some ways, Aboriginal peoples off reserve are in the worst of all possible positions — we carry the unhealthy legacy of Aboriginal policies and dysfunctional backgrounds, without the support and encouragement of an Aboriginal community around us.”

And not only do studies tend to focus on natives who live on reserves, a large percentage of government funding is directed at them. Of the \$58 million in a 5-year federal program aimed at combating diabetes among Aboriginal people, the congress says that only \$14.5 million is being spent on the off-reserve population.

Dorey said the report is welcome because it focuses on people who are often forgotten. “This will help make Canadians more aware of what the real situation is.” — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



Health Canada

A forgotten population?

Federal committee supports patenting of some life forms

The Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee (CBAC) has opted to support the patenting of life forms, such as seeds and plants, in the hope that this will advance biotechnology and other research in Canada.

The committee, an arm’s-length expert body funded by the federal government, is against granting patents on humans at any stage of development. It does support the patenting of higher life forms, subject to certain limits. It is making its recommendations before the Supreme Court of Canada rules on patent issues concerning Harvard University’s “oncomouse,” a case that has highlighted issues surrounding intellectual property rights. (The oncomouse was genetically modified to develop cancer. It has already been

patented in the US and its creators want a similar patent here.)

“Some people feel there is a moral objection to patents on living things because of the commodification of life,” says Dr. Arnold Naimark, CBAC chair and director of the Centre for the Advancement of Medicine at the University of Manitoba. “Others were concerned about monopoly control of living things. The flipside is that it would bring economic benefit through biotechnology and can advance science and enhance human health and welfare.” Both the US and Europe allow patents on higher life forms.

The committee’s recommendations, released in June, propose that there be a new “opposition procedure” under

Canada’s Patent Act that would allow people to protest a patent that has been granted. It says the act should also include a “farmer’s privilege” that lets farmers save and sow seeds from patented plants as long as the progeny are not sold for seeding purposes.

Regardless of the outcome in court, Naimark says Parliament should enact legislation because of concerns surrounding new patenting issues.

The CBAC also recommended that Canada harmonize its patent laws with those of its international trading partners. Canada signed the World Intellectual Property Organization Patent Law Treaty in May 2001, but it won’t be ratified until other member countries have signed. — *Louise Gagnon, Ottawa*