

NURSES IN THE SNOWS



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CANADA'S northern territories extend from the 60th Parallel to the North Pole encompassing an area of 1.5 million square miles, or 40 per cent of entire Canada. Their population is 52,000, while Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories, is a town of only 5,000. The rest of the population is spread across this vast territory where the only year-round means of transportation is by air; in summer, access is possible by boat to some of the smaller communities, made up mostly of Indians and Eskimos.

To provide these people with health care needs a special, very special, effort and the government is doing it through some 200 nursing stations. Nurses from various parts of the world man these isolated stations, braving the most rigorous climate.

All stations are equipped with modern out-patient and in-patient facilities, are generally manned by one to three nurses who also have their living quarters on the premises. The average is two to a station.

As for the nurse, she must wear many hats at the same time and

wear them proficiently: the job is not for the faint-hearted. The northern nurse must render emergency treatment at all hours — day and night. And it isn't as simple as that. Gunshot and knife wounds, fingers severed by an axe, drownings, eye injuries, broken limbs and facial lacerations are the kind of injuries that most often have to be treated by the 3 nurses. And fast. And they have to be good diagnosticians, well versed in preventive medicine, and thoroughly skilled in midwifery all at the same time.

The northern nurse must be able to extract a tooth when occasion demands it; take X-rays and write reports; perform minor laboratory chores and, most important, be skilful in counselling individuals



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with emotional problems. She comes across day-to-day situations not found in any job description and that demands great tact and great forbearance.

And a great sense of humour, too — for she would be lost without it. Also some political knowledge, a consideration for the patients' frailties and an understanding of alien cultures. She must have a warm personality because that is half the battle won when you are dealing with people who are shy and, in some cases, overly hesitant. Above all, she must have the common sense to deal with cases that don't necessarily demand a copy-book answer.

Rose-Marie Mills is one such nurse in charge of Snowdrift station. The community consist of 200

Indians and 12 whites and although it is only 118 miles east of Yellowknife there are no connecting roads. The only way is by air except, of course, in summer when there is access by water.

Radio telephone communications with Yellowknife, where the nearest hospital is, are very poor because of the weather. On occasion it may be difficult to consult the doctor at Yellowknife by telephone and impossible to evacuate a seriously ill patient by air. Very often, therefore, she herself is called upon to make life-and-death decisions on the spot.

Apart from the "casualty ward" emergencies, many of the cases involve children with respiratory diseases like chronic chest colds that often develop into bronchitis

Nurses at remote northern posts have to work in extreme cold and often travel in deep snow (pic 1). A nurse with an Indian baby of the Frobisher Bay hospital (pic 2). A nurse examines an 82 year-old Eskimo woman (pic 3). Helping a fracture victim (pic 4). A typical nursing station in Arctic Bay in the extreme north of Canada (pic 5).



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and pneumonia. Gastroenteritis and allied ailments are common. So are skin diseases like eczema. The challenge is as great as the odds. And it is growing every day.

That is all the more why nurses like Rose-Marie Mills are looked upon by the Canadian Government as its ambassadors in the North. Their relationships with the Indian and Eskimo communities may well govern the basic attitudes of these native people.