

Experts on Minanata disease say situation at Kenora grave

Reprinted from Akwesasne Notes

While Kenora, Ontario, festers on the poison of racism, the native people are dying of the poison of mercury.

Two Japanese experts on Minamata disease - environmental mercury poisoning - say the situation at two reserves near Kenora is grave and shocking.

They found symptoms consistent with early mercury poisoning. Cats at White Dog and Grassy Narrows reserve are dying the same bizarre deaths as cats in Minamata and Niigata, Japan, before the disease showed up in humans a few years ago.

The Japanese experts termed the Canadian governmental officials supposedly involved with the mercury situation as "irresponsible, indifferent, and (they) know nothing about mercury at all."

So far, all the meaningful data collected on the subject in Canada has come not from government, but from concerned laymen.

"If you don't start action you will have a more serious result than we had," Dr. Jun Ui, professor of urban engineering at the University of Tokyo, told a public meeting at the University of Toronto in late March.

Dr. Masazumi Harada, of the University of Kumamoto, and chief medical investigator of Minamata Disease in Japan, said, "The situation is very shocking. Please don't repeat the mistakes we made in Japan."

Dr. Harada showed a film of Japanese cats writing in uncontrollable spasms, or trying to walk on hind legs that wouldn't respond. Many cats in that country dragged themselves to the sea and drowned themselves.

Before the disease was dubbed Minamata Disease, people of that town called it "cat's dancing disease".

Then he showed a film of a cat from the White Dog reserve. It was going through the same motions.

After their investigations in the north, the two experts then spoke at the University of Toronto's Medical Science Center along with Chief Andy Keewatin. They told the general public it should organize support to force the Canadian Government to release all its reports on mercury poisoning and to stop the companies from further pollution.

Dr. Jun Ui said, "I think that in the Dryden (Kenora) area it is worse than it is in Japan. Here, there's not as much mud and the mercury lies on top longer, while in Japan the mud covers it up and it's coming out of the various river mouths."

Dr. Jun Ui told the audience, "If it were this bad in Japan, people would actually be taking matters into their own hands."

The two physicians were also shocked at the living conditions of the native people. "If people had to live like that in Japan," they said, "they'd automatically rebel."

People can get mercury poisoning by eating the types of food in the area: fish, ducks, and even deer which drink the polluted water and eat the poisoned grass along the shore. The disease, which attacks the central nervous system, has no known cure. It makes people act something like a drunk.

In 1956, when Minamata Bay in Japan was polluted with heavy metals, the people of Minamata took the struggle into their own hands and won an anti-pollution law which places the burden of proof on the company that it is not polluting. If the people can show they suffered harm, the company must pay 100 percent compensation, plus 100 percent of whatever it costs for them to clean it up.

The two Japanese scientists pried out of Ottawa officials the information that a cat brought into the area and fed the same fish the native people eat developed Minamata disease within 100 days. The Canadian Government has said that the official results will not be released for 1 1/2 years.

Dr. Ui said the pulp waste in Dryden was incredible in a country that had been described to him as a kind of paradise with green forests and blue lakes. He also expressed surprise in the "large difference between the whites and the Indians, especially the miserable living conditions on the reserves."

And, he added, "all of us were surprised with the meeting with the Standing Committee for Mercury Pollution in Ottawa. Some members of the Government are irresponsible and indifferent in their attitude. Some know nothing of mercury at all."

In July, ten White Dog and Grassy Narrows people, at least some of whom are sure to have mercury poisoning, were brought to Tokyo by the Minamata Patients' Federation, composed of Japanese people who victims of the disease. There they will see medical experts - doctors who know something about the disease.



Sorry Mr. Silverfish, there is no cure. But I'm going to prescribe a royal commission to see you in a decade or so. Until then take two Indian Affairs officers and a glass of water ...

Just a week before, Prof. Tadao Takeuchi announced from Kumamoto that brain specimens of two cats, one from each reserve, showed both cats had been poisoned. One of the cats had died with the classic symptoms of mercury poisoning, and the other cat was killed before the disease itself had finished it off.

At the same time, the governor of Kumamoto prefecture in which Minamata lies added 15 more persons to the list of 723 known victims of the disease. 120 persons on the list have already died.

Government experts have traced the source of the mercury in the affected English and Wabigoon River systems to the Dryden Chemical Company in its processes to supply the companion Dryden Pulp and Paper Co. mill. The company says it will be converting to a non-mercury system later this year "if the equipment comes in time." However, it is inherent in mercury poisoning that the mercury will be in the water for generations to come, and people who already have the disease but who have not yet begun to show outward symptoms cannot be helped.

Ian Ramsay, director of Environment's Thunder Bay office, confirmed that the mercury in the bottom sludge is expected to be a problem "for nobody knows how long." He thinks the Kenora "problem" is going to be a longer, stretched-out version of the Minamata tragedy.

Dr. Peter Newberry, a retired Canadian Forces physician, has been at the reserves since last November. He tells of one 35-year-old man with high mercury readings, a man who once had hopes of playing professional hockey, who now has an uncontrollable quiver in his upper lip, difficulty pronouncing some words, and is unable to balance on one foot with his eyes closed. That is the beginning of the end.

Grassy Narrows is just 50 miles from Kenora. It's only commercial food supply is the Hudson's Bay Company's store, where food prices are about twice the rates in Kenora. A dozen eggs are \$1.65, bacon \$1.85 a slab pound, apples \$2.35 for five pounds. The Indian Affairs Department had rejected a plea from Grassy Narrows for help in starting a non-profit cooperative store - the Department ruled such a store would be unfair competition for the Hudson's Bay Co.

The Ontario and Canadian Governments continue to sidestep the issue. On April 30, the Ontario

Government offered the Indians community freezers and access to uncontaminated lakes so they may fish to stock the freezers.

Recently, the standard don't-eat-the-fish letters sent to residents of the two reserves were withdrawn. The universal advice now is not to eat the fish.

Ontario Cabinet ministers, notably Health Minister Frank Miller, repeatedly told the Ontario Legislature last fall that "we told the Indians to stop eating the fish." Actually, there were three letters - severely poisoned persons were told no more fish, while those less-severely poisoned were advised to eat smaller fish, and to fish in waters with lower mercury counts.

The politicians and their scientific hired hands were still saying that they lacked proof that the mercury is damaging Indian health. "We are getting more cautious," they concede.

Besides, as Dr. Peter Connop, Thunder Bay zone director of the federal Health Ministry's medical services branch says, "All the politics of the whole matter are very complicating factors."

That includes efforts on the part of the government not to say anything that might further damage the tourist and sport-fishing industries of Ontario's north, already taking losses in their profits from the temporary bans on fishing for food the Ontario Government issued in 1973.

As a partial and temporary measure, native people at Restigouche Reserve on the St. Lawrence River in eastern Quebec announced it would ship freshly-caught salmon to their relatives at White Dog and Grassy Narrows. All costs of the donated shipment were covered by the Micmac reserve. In return appreciation, the Ontario reserves sent wild rice to Restigouche.

Aileen M. Smith, who with her husband, W. Eugene Smith, one of the U.S.' most famous news photographers, had documented the Minamata disease, tells how she had talked to her friends in Japan about what was happening with the native people in Kenora. "The shake their heads. 'Won't we ever learn?' they say. I wish the Canadians could hear Minamata patients speak of Canada as though it were just as close to them as any part of the Minamata area. I wish somehow that I could make those people in Canada feel the anguish in the eyes of the Minamata patients for the patients-to-be."

