

MEDICAL PRACTICE AMONG THE BUSH INDIANS OF
NORTHERN MANITOBA*

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Norway House is situated in the northern part of the Province of Manitoba approximately 350 miles north of Winnipeg on the Nelson River. During the summer months there is communication with Winnipeg by water but following the freeze-up in the fall the only communication with outside points is by plane or dog team which makes connection with the Hudson Bay Railway as it runs between The Pas and Churchill. In saying this I have told you much about life in this country. Our biggest problem is one of transportation and communication. Before the war, things were not too bad. We had a weekly plane service, but even with that we had long periods of no communication with the outside, due to the break-up and freeze-up periods. However, planes are scarce here now, except on charter, which is very expensive.

I will try to give you some idea of my practice here. I find it very interesting, though extremely busy. The worst feature is the lack of companionship of any medical men. I must face and handle each problem alone, as it arises.

Actually Norway House is not very far north. We are on the same level of latitude as The Pas and Edmonton, places which must now be well known to the Americans, as since the war they have built large air bases at both these places. However, we might as well be at the Pole as far as isolation goes. The only way to reach this place in summer is by steamer up Lake Winnipeg, or overland by dogs in the winter. A horse can be driven in winter from Wabowden, a point on the Hudson Bay Railway, 150 miles away, but it is a long hard trip, and only safe in the dead of winter. Thus the only way of travelling in this country is by air. I do considerable flying, and plan to do much more as planes become available; indeed our Department plans to base a plane in this district.

There is a radio station at Norway House which connects with Winnipeg. All points inland from Norway House can be contacted by radio, but this service is not of the best, and at times is very poor.

I am responsible for the medical services for a radius of 200 miles north and east of Norway House, and for about 50 miles south of here.

Probably if I described a couple of trips, you would get an idea of the type of work. First though, I should state that the Indians of Northern Manitoba have an incidence of tuberculosis that is over 1,400 per 100,000, and I believe on the increase. Thus, in every case one must consider tuberculosis.

I left here toward the end of January by dog train to travel 60 miles straight north to a point called Cross Lake. Here, a group of 900 Indians live, and at this point the Indian Department maintains a boarding school for 100 Indian children. I had been informed of an epidemic of jaundice. Investigation showed that they had had an epidemic of jaundice, and practically the entire population had been infected. This infection has proved troublesome throughout this country in the past year. On top of this, I found an epidemic, if you could call it such, of gonorrhœa. The Indian is promiscuous, and amoral. Sexual intercourse is an urge to be satisfied as the occasion arises; just as when one is thirsty, one drinks. At Cross Lake, as at all our Indian Reserves, there are missionaries, whom we supply with drugs, including sulfa drugs. I found that some Indians had been treated partially; some had become sulfa-resistant; others allergic to the drug. I carried no microscope. I do not believe an Indian can be treated for any sickness unless he is hospitalized, as he cannot be

*The following was received in the form of a personal letter and has been only slightly altered for purposes of publication.