

Alaska Native Health: the Role of Lifestyle

There is a possibility there will be a hospital in Unalaska some day, but no one can predict when. However, Unalaska will most likely never have a heart surgery capability. Togiak, Atkasuk, Emmonak, Gulkana, Tatitlik and literally hundreds of other villages in Alaska may never have a physician or a psychiatrist or a proctologist to serve them.

In short, much of Alaska . . . most of it, in fact . . . will never have what most of the rest of the nation has come to consider basic medical services. The great advances in medical technology will only be available to rural Alaskans if they

are willing and able to fly to Anchorage, Fairbanks or the "Lower 48." In short, economic realities will most likely rule out the kinds of possibilities described above for most Alaskan villages.

How serious is this?

To the person who needs heart surgery, a physician, a psychiatrist or a proctologist, it can be very serious. In addition to the illness, that person will experience the cost of air fare from home to the city. That person may also have to pay for things to be taken care of at home while away getting treatment. The individual may bear the added ex-

pense of taking other family members along to the urban center, or be required to stay in the city between or following treatments in order to do follow-up lab work or to be available to the physician for observation.

Is there an alternative?

There is an alternative if we take seriously the implications of current patterns of Alaska Native illness. The article entitled, "Alaska Native Health: The Role of Lifestyle," states that much of what Alaska Natives become ill from and die from . . . is preventable!

Now that is certainly welcome news for people who live

in isolated places, where obtaining adequate human resources may always be a problem!

The message seems clear. If you live in a large city, unhealthy lifestyle decisions can be modified because of the nearness of advanced medical technology (although there are limits . . . once your lungs or heart are gone from smoking; or your liver from alcohol abuse; or your colon from improper diet, there really isn't very much science can do). But, if you live in a remote area, you need to be healthier.

The greatest advance in im-

proving human health that can be made by a remote Alaskan village has nothing to do with getting more health services (clinics, hospitals, physicians). It has to do with not smoking, increasing exercise, eating nutritious foods, decreasing psychological stress.

The greatest gift a village can give its young people is knowledge of how their bodies function and the sense of personal responsibility for its upkeep. Only then, perhaps, will it be less important that Unalaska may never have a heart surgeon, or Togiak a proctologist.