

# Tuberculosis outbreak contained

by Holly F. Reimer

Tundra Times reporter

The recent tuberculosis outbreak in Savoonga has apparently been contained thus far, according to the State of Alaska Division of Epidemiology.

Mike Jones, head of the immunization and tuberculosis program, said the outbreak this year has been about the same as the past few years, but Sa-

voonga had the most reported cases which totaled 13.

Jones couldn't give specific numbers for other areas where the disease was also reported. But earlier reports found those communities to be Toksook Bay and St. Paul Island.

In the past three years, reports show the number of those infected by tuberculosis has only increased by a small

percentage.

In 1988 there were 51 cases reported. In 1989 there were 59 reported cases, and as of Dec. 19, 1990, 60 cases have been reported.

Jones said of the 60 cases the largest amount reported was from Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island.

Of the 1990 count, 42 cases were

continued on page thirteen

# • Tuberculosis outbreak

continued from page one

collected from 22 communities from around the state, and this data also excluded Anchorage, Fairbanks and Juneau.

"It's not uncommon to have an outbreak," Jones said.

Alaska is a state with a history of tuberculosis. A plague hit Alaska in the '40s and '50s that nearly destroyed the population of many villages and it nearly killed off entire families.

But today, health officials say, tuberculosis can be contained and infected persons can be cured, if they follow doctors orders.

Dr. James Grabman, who is the Indian Health Service tuberculosis control officer and deputy chief of medicine, said taking prescribed medicine is very important.

"With modern medication a person isn't infectious after about two weeks. Folks aren't routinely hospitalized anymore," he said.

But he warned that if a person stops taking the prescribed medication the person will not be cured.

He said years ago when the medication used wasn't all that effective in fighting tuberculosis, infected persons were put into a sanatorium with no specific treatment and many stayed in these confines until they died. Then,

as medicine advanced, a person could be cured within two years or so. And today, with even more advanced medical technology, it still takes about six to nine months to be fully cured of the infection.

Grabman said the disease ran rampant in the old days mainly because people started living in larger groups, and long winter months kept many indoors for long periods of time with little circulation in the air.

Grabman said tuberculosis is a bacterial infection that usually infects the lungs. It is spread through the air by coughing or sneezing.

He is warning people that if a persistent cough or sudden weight loss occurs those individuals should be examined by a physician or community health provider.

Jones said because Alaska reports more cases of tuberculosis than other parts of the United States that it is routine procedure for school age children to get TB tests once a year.

A close eye is being kept on those communities who reported tuberculosis outbreaks to make sure the infection has been contained.