

Frozen family tells' about Inuit health

By Carl Hild
Deputy Director
Social Health Services

In the last Newsletter I spoke about studies and papers that have come from the finding of the "Frozen Family of Barrow." On March 11 and 12 the Alaska Anthropological Association held its Tenth Annual Meeting in Anchorage. The major topic of concern was "The Human Heritage of Utkeagvik Village: An Interdisciplinary Study of Lifeways and Life in Pre-contact Inupiat Alaska."

The presentations at the meeting were excellent. Dr. Michael Zimmerman from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania reported his findings as he was the physician who performed the autopsies. One body was so well preserved that he could perform the autopsy as if the person had just died. The skin was flexible, and all the organs were easily identifiable.

Overall findings pointed out some very interesting facts. The two bodies that were intact were women. The other three bodies only existed in the presence of a few bones. The two women had been crushed and died of suffocation. It looks as if the house had been crushed by a possible

ice override from the ocean and the two women who were caught inside were frozen and preserved. Robert Spencer, in his book, "The North Alaskan Eskimo" relates a story of such an event at a location very near where the bodies were found.

Before their death it appears the people were generally healthy. The older woman, perhaps early to mid-forties, had just had a baby as she was lactating and showed other signs of a recent pregnancy. No baby was found, but the woman was close to the entrance of the house. Perhaps the child was rescued, died, but was not preserved, or has not been found yet. Excavation is planned for the rest of the house this summer.

The presentations showed that there were no middle ear problems. The long bones of the body showed Harris lines, which indicate times of slow growth and bad nutrition. This probably reflects occasional periods, when food was scarce and starvation occurred.

Bone ends were soft, which is a sign of problems with metabolizing calcium. This could be because of diet, lack of sunlight or other metabolic prob-

lems.

The lungs were full of black spot. The seal oil lamps that were used provided good light and heat when trimmed. It was the woman's job to keep the lamp trimmed. When one of these lamps becomes untrimmed it puts off a great deal of black sooty smoke. The women would have to breathe in the smoke as they trimmed the lamp. Needless to say there were health problems, but not the same ones we face today.

Dr. Zimmerman stated he had never worked on an old body that showed signs of cancer. The buckets that were found in the house that contained frozen material were examined. One bucket of urine, one buck-

et of urine and feces, and one bucket and animal organs all tested out as being sterile. The Center for Disease Control was surprised at this finding. Usually old urine and all fecal material have some microorganisms. These had none. There are theories on cold and ions that explain how the Arctic might have been without disease or close to sterile. It seems almost impossible, but that was long ago.

Today we must deal with middle ear infections, bad diets, high stress, substance abuse, and a lack of feeling of self worth. Most of the health problems of today are preventable by each individual. Stay clean, eat well, relax, do

not abuse drugs or alcohol and build a good self image and you are on the right path to good health.

The North Slope Borough Health and Social Services Agency has many programs that we would love to be able to close down for lack of use: alcoholism, drug abuse, etc. Unfortunately these programs are very heavily used. As long as people have health and social problems we will be busy.

We are helping all the residents and visitors of our region, but we would really rather have them take care of themselves and be healthy. **HELP US, HELP YOU.** Stay healthy.

