

Immunization Against Measles Is Speeded Up

Village immunizations against measles and other diseases have been speeded up, after an outbreak of measles in Buckland recently reached epidemic proportions.

Fifty-five cases of measles were reported in the village, which has a population of 100. Buckland is located just south of Kotzebue in Northwest Alaska.

Children, for the most part, were affected in the epidemic.

"The epidemic there affected practically every person who was susceptible to the disease," said Dr. Lionel Richardson, Regional Health Officer with the state Department of Health.

"Only two cases of pneumonia resulting from measles were flown in from Buckland and detained at the Kotzebue hospital. These were later

(Continued on Page 7)

Measles . . .

(Continued from Page 1)

discharged as completely recovered."

The first case of measles in Buckland showed up July 28, Richardson said, and the outbreak reached epidemic proportions by August 2.

Dr. Dudley Weider of the Alaska Native Health Service Hospital at Kotzebue and a public health nurse were flown into Buckland to give vaccinations.

Measles shots had been given in Buckland before, Richardson said, but many of the children had apparently been missed. The doctor-nurse team visit the village at least three times a year giving shots, he said.

No outbreaks of the Buckland intensity have started in any other villages, Richardson said, and none were expected as the vaccination program proceeded.

A statewide immunization program is under way after a small measles outbreak in Anchorage resulted in one case of dangerous encephalitis.

"Because of the great need to bring all of the remote arctic villages up to the desired level of immunization from measles," Richardson said. "The immunization program of the state Department of Health has been accelerated and intensified."

The last epidemic of measles in Buckland was in 1938, said Dr. Richardson.

In the early part of the century vast epidemics of diseases almost wiped out Alaska's entire Eskimo and Indian population. Tuberculosis, measles, smallpox and other diseases went through villages like plagues and killed hundreds.

In some places, whole villages were wiped out.

Today the Alaska Native Health service operates hospitals in Barrow, Kotzebue, Bethel, Tanana and Anchorage. Nurses and doctors make regular trips to remote villages.

Even today, though, critical short-staffing and slim budgets in the state and federal health services keep the level of health service to villagers at a barely-sufficient level.

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