

Medical teams compare problems, techniques

by Barbara Crane

Tundra Times reporter

Forty-nine Alaskan medical professionals and scientists traveled from Nome to Provideniya last month to begin a three-week study of the Soviet health care system.

The Alaskans then spread out into the smaller villages of the Magadan/Chukotka Region of the Soviet Far East, meeting with their Soviet counterparts and comparing problems and techniques.

"Our regions and our people are so identical, and many of our problems are also identical," said Dr. Ted Mala, the Alaska delegation's leader and director of the University of Alaska Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies.

"In some areas, we're really ahead of the Soviets, and in other areas, they are ahead of us. We can learn from each other."

One highlight of the trip was a visit to a traveling clinic housed in a large tent. The clinic follows Soviet reindeer herders around as they move their animals to fresh grazing areas.

"We're particularly interested in their non-traditional health care practices," Mala said.

"When you go over there and see how healthy people are, you begin to realize how many different avenues there are to good health. They do quite well without a lot of our modern technology."

A delegation of 16 Soviet medical



Dr. Ted Mala, of Alaska, left, listens as Dr. Alexi N. Lebedev, Magadan Region minister of health compares some similar problems.

doctors returned with the group to Alaska and visited health care facilities in Anchorage, Nome and Kotzebue.

The minister of health of the Magadan Region, Dr. Alexi N. Lebedev, declared the visits a success, though in the beginning he had some doubts.

"At first, we did not know each other," Lebedev said through an interpreter. "We did not know what kinds of systems each country might have and we were worried about what

sort of people the Alaskans would be.

"But from the first day we could see they were very friendly and we were going to have strong ties of friendship with them."

Lebedev recalled being surprised by the Alaskans' intense work attitude.

"At first they said, 'No rest, no rest, absolutely no rest! We came to work, work, work!'"

"But by the end of their visit, these people who were so anxious to work were also taking time to enjoy each

other's company and find out about each other's families."

As a result of these visits, an agreement was signed by the Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies, the Magadan Health Department and the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services.

This agreement outlines a five-year plan for the continuing exchange of medical specialists and their expertise.

The agreement lists 13 areas of mutual concern, including trauma and orthopedics, maternal and childhood care, crisis intervention, non-traditional health care techniques, delivery of rural health care services and treatment of alcoholism.

Lebedev called the agreement "a wonderful model of the way we've been able to agree on a medical study."

"But it's not just the agreement that is important," he said. "It is the friendship between our two countries that counts."

As Mala signed the agreement, he quoted from its last paragraph:

"It is our hope that Alaska and Magadan will become a model of peace and friendship to show the world how well our nations can work together."

"We have much in common to share. The future of our planet and our people depends on these initiatives that work for the welfare of us all."

"We cannot afford to do anything else."

Photo by Barbara Crane