

Health aides have impact on Bush

by Louise Donhauser

Tundra Times

Don't expect an ambulance to pick you up if you injure yourself in rural Alaska. . . but do expect a health aid to give you assistance.

In rural Alaska the first person to respond to and emergency is usually a health aid. Their contribution has had a significant impact on the health and well being of rural Alaskans.

At the International Symposium on Circumpolar Health, which was held in Anchorage, guest speaker C.D. Schraer said the decrease of infant death in rural Alaska can be credited to health aids.

The village care givers also have treated enough patients to result in a decrease of the daily hospital load in urban areas. There has been a decrease in rheumatic fever because in recent years many health aids administer throat cultures testing for the disease.

Before the health aid program was introduced in 1968 by an act of Congress, there was a lack of immediacy when medical emergencies occurred. The nearest doctor, nurse or paramedic sometimes was hours away from a village.

But the program didn't get its start to respond to medical emergencies. In 1968 the program's purpose was to treat tuberculosis patients who required light medical care after returning to their villages from hospitals. As the program grew to include 363 health aids and alternates, their responsibilities also grew to include such things as responding to medical emergencies.

Initially health aids worked in their homes and stored supplies in their home. The residential medical facilities have been replaced by clinics, some of which have only basic supplies such as medicine. But clinics in larger communities often are equipped with beds, weight scales and other supplies.

The person selected to run a clinic isn't self appointed or "hired." Village residents select an aid. Today, 99 percent of the health aids are women and in many cases Native in her early 30's. The average health aid reads at the seventh grade level but in other areas the health aid tests at the 10-12 high school grade level.

Training of the health aid is done in Anchorage, Bethel and Nome during a 10-week session which is divided into three sessions to include acute care patient evaluation, environment and social mental health skills. A session is also devoted to maternal child health.

Health aids have special skills

which aren't acquired during the 10-week training session. Schraer explained some of the "extras"

that health aids put into their jobs.

"Health aids have to be

imaginative, creative, hardworking people. They deserve a lot of credit. Those of us who are

involved feel the health aids have made major improvements in Alaska Native health."