

Spread of viral meningitis epidemic slows

by Holly F. Reimer

Tundra Times reporter

The viral meningitis epidemic which struck hard in Southwest Alaska this summer has apparently started to subside, according to health officials.

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Initially, officials predicted that only about half of Kotlik residents would get sick, but nearly two-thirds of the population contracted the virus. Kotlik is where the virus originated a few weeks ago and has generally stayed there with a few sporadic outbreaks in surrounding villages.

Doctors also predicted that the virus would keep spreading throughout the region and possibly beyond, which in

fact it did not.

Dr. Donn Kruse, medical director at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corp. in Bethel, said right now health officials aren't sure why the virus was so prevalent in Kotlik, but an epidemiologist from the State Office of Public Health and Social Services in Anchorage was there to investigate.

Although there have been sporadic breakouts in nearby villages, Kotlik

has the most diagnosed cases. Right now it is estimated at 25.

Within the last two weeks, two children were rushed to the hospital suffering from seizures. Kruse said in general adults are hit harder with this type of virus but children are more prone to seizures.

Kruse said one of the biggest concerns is that an individual may have

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symptoms, but ignore them because people hear there is no curative medicine.

"We don't want anybody to wind up dead from dehydration or find the person has bacterial meningitis, which is deadly. There is a great deal of concern," Kruse said during an interview over the telephone recently.

"We are encouraging everyone and their children who have symptoms to be seen by a physician, to make sure it's not the bacterial kind," Kruse said.

Betty Waska, who is a public health aide in Kotlik, said she was afraid that she would contract the virus. She not only had to work with infected people, but also had to come home to it.

"I was really scared because my daughter had it," Waska said during a recent telephone conversation.

Even though the transmission of the virus has appeared to be somewhat alleviated in Kotlik, Waska warned people not to ignore symptoms and to keep hands clean.

Dr. Carl Li, medical epidemiologist for the State Office of Public Health and Social Services Section of Epidemiology in Anchorage, said his office has been conducting an ongoing investigation of the virus since mid-July. Although no specifics of the study have been released, he said it appears that more children have been diagnosed with having the virus than adults.

"At this point it would only be speculation to say why more children have it," Li said.

Li also said this virus has such a wide spectrum of symptoms and non-symptoms that an exact number of those who are or those who have been infected is difficult to determine.