

Deadly politics

The federal government, this time the Department of Health and Human Services, appears once again to be coming up short in its responsibilities to the Natives of Alaska, and indeed of the entire United States. Were it not for the fact that it is in an area of critical importance — health care — with the potentially tragic consequences so alarming, we would say little or nothing and allow the judicial process to run its cumbersome course.

But the potential for neglect in this instance borders on the criminal, and something must be done soon to prevent a situation from happening in which lives could be lost from that neglect.

What is behind all this?

A U.S. District Court judge recently ruled that HHS, under whose umbrella the Indian Health Service falls, had violated the Indian Hiring Preference Act six years ago. At that time, the IHS turned down the application of Lillian Preston, originally from Nenana, for a social worker's position because she did not have a master's degree. The judge ordered HHS to bring its hiring practices within line.

The ruling makes sense. A Native speaking her own language and knowledgeable in her own customs and lifestyles could be a much more effective social worker to her people than someone whose only qualification was a master's degree. Who can deny Della Keats' contribution to Alaska medicine? Could a master's degree make another more qualified than she?

What doesn't make sense is what has since happened. An appeal was filed against the judge's decision, and in the interim, HHS ordered a hiring freeze on all personnel within the IHS nationwide. This includes nurses, doctors, laboratory technicians and other personnel whose training goes beyond the boundaries which that judicial decision was intended.

As a result of that hiring freeze, patients in Bethel, Mt. Edgecumbe, Anchorage and many other IHS-served areas are being cared for by under-manned staffs of nurses, technicians and doctors, to the point that it could soon become critical.

The Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage finds itself faced with the real possibility of losing five doctors this summer and with no replacement. This on top of already being short of lab technicians, who although very much behind the scenes in a hospital, provide very necessary and often life-saving functions in terms of intensive care monitoring and lab analysis.

And although the personnel at the Medical Center are dedicated and extremely hard-working, they may be forced into stop-gap measures such as transferring patients needing monitoring to other hospitals around Anchorage where there is no such personnel shortage.

It appears to us that HHS is now, through their action, playing politics with peoples' lives and we would strongly urge that they stop that action immediately. We would further urge that our congressional delegation take immediate steps to correct what we consider to be a dangerous and irresponsible stance on the part of Health and Human Services.

It is our plea that common sense and humane reasoning be applied by the very federal agency that is mandated to be humane and caring.