

Hepatitis B under control

by Jill McGuire

for the Tundra Times

Hepatitis B, a disease which reached epidemic proportions among Natives of Southwest Alaska just three years ago, is now virtually nonexistent, according to the Indian Health Service in Anchorage.

Clare Helminiak, assistant coordinator of the Hepatitis B control program, reported that the disease, which was found in almost 1,500 Native children, has been brought under control in rural villages by mass screening and immunization.

"What we are seeing now are statistics closer to those in the Lower 48," Helminiak said.

The statistics, according to

Helminiak, show the disease is now generally confined to sexually active people and those involved with intravenous drug use.

"Hepatitis B is now confined generally to the urban areas in ages 20 to 45," she said.

Hepatitis is a viral disease affecting the liver. Symptoms can include chills, fever, nausea, abdominal pain and jaundice. Hepatitis B is a more serious strain of the virus that can lead to liver cancer and death.

As early as 1982 medical officials noticed a dramatic rise in the number of cases of Hepatitis B in isolated villages in Western Alaska. By 1983, more than 3,000 Natives were infected. Half of them were children

under the age of 10.

Officials feared that, left unchecked, Hepatitis B would infect another 3,600 Natives by 1984.

With \$5 million of state and federal funding, Dr. Everett Rhoades of the Indian Health Service set up a three-year program of screening and immunization. Children were the top priority.

Today, the program is widely hailed as a success. The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta recently called the Alaska program a "model for the entire world in controlling the spread of Hepatitis B." Plans are now underway to duplicate the Alaska plan in American Samoa.

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Health officials focus on urban areas

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U.S. Sen. Frank Murkowski, who helped win federal aid for the project, said Alaska was able to combat the problem through a coordinated effort of many agencies.

"Not only did we save lives, but it was a learning experience in dealing with critical health problems among the Native population," he said.

Health officials are now concentrating on urban areas in an effort to reach Natives who have not been screened for the disease.

"We need to get in touch with the sexually active urban population of young Natives," Helminiak said.

"Unfortunately, they are usually the healthiest segment of the population," she said. "We rarely see them at the

health centers. But they must remember you can carry this disease and not have any symptoms."

WHAT'S NEW

A new Hepatitis B Vaccine is due on the market in 1987. Designed by Genetech of California, the vaccine is made from yeast and is one of the new genetically engineered drugs in use by the medical establishment.

Vaccines commonly used to control the disease are made from human blood products. Officials at the Indian Health Service say the new vaccine will be reserved for patients with blood product allergies. The new vaccine is expected to cost \$130 for each bottle.

AIDS AND HEPATITIS B

Because the vaccine currently used for immunization is a plasma product drug, made from the blood of Hepatitis infected individuals, many people were concerned that the AIDS virus

could be present.

Dr. Elizabeth Tower of the State Health Department reports that the plasma vaccine, which has been in use for five years, is purified and tested for the AIDS virus before being shipped to medical centers. Tower call the plasma vaccine "safe."

CHILDREN AND TREATMENTS

Parents are reminded that due to insurance liability, children must be accompanied by their parents or legal guardians when being vaccinated for Hepatitis.