

# Canadian nurses hold future in their hands

By Dr. Ted Mala

They came from all parts of Canada to spend several days together sharing concerns and making new acquaintances. They discussed Indian health affairs and Native Land Claims negotiations. They all shared one thing in common: they are the Indian and Inuit Nurses of Canada.

The scene is very much like that which took place in the '70's in Alaska. Speeches were made about the legal and moral obligations of the government towards Native peoples. Questions arose concerning the implications of setting up health and non-profit corporations and the training of individuals to run them.

One quite interesting problem that differs us from our Canadian relatives is that they have something called "status" and "non-status" Indians. If an Indian wanted to take part years ago in higher education or loan programs, they had to sign away their rights and entitlements as Indians.

They then became known as "non-status" Indians which in essence made them ineligible for Indian health and other federal Indian entitlement programs.

The question now is with the new health corporations taking on the role of health provider for their regions (or "reserves" as they call them). The trend of the Canadian federal government is to allow them to provide services to "status" Indians only.

The movement to do away with this "status, non-status" classification is one of the hottest issues in Canada with significant political and financial implications. I have been told that of the total Canadian Native community of 1,100,000, there are about 25,000 Inuit, 325,000 status Indians and 750,000 non-status Indians!

We heard the concerns of members from different bands and reserves, including those who border our state. It seems incredible to me that we have not worked more closely with our relatives separated from us only by an imaginary political line dividing our borders.

Canada is a land divided into Provinces and Territories.

Canadian Natives live on reserves, some of which can deal directly with their federal government, and others must work through their province (as is the case in the Yukon Territory). What has been proposed is that the bands get title to their land but not to the sub-surface rights which means that in many places the real value of the land is underneath it.

Imagine finding oil on some barren land that you own and not having the right to take it out?

Obviously this has significant implications as to the potential income of a band to provide services to its members. Another difference between Alaska and Canada is that their Ministers are appointed through a general election, where our Secretaries are nominated by the President and approved by Congress.

In the area of Canadian Indian Affairs, the Honorable Minister of Health and Welfare of Canada, Monique Begin, broke tradition and appointed two Native Registered Nurses as Special Assistants for Native concerns. The current appointee is Madeliene Stout, RN.

The previous appointment was Jean Goodwill, RN, who resigned to become full-time president of the Indian and Inuit Nurses of Canada Association. Both are Cree Indians, based in Ottawa, their Nations Capitol.

What else were they concerned about? How Indian people can become more involved in their own health care and delivery; entry to practice issues — professional and para-professional; new nursing programs and funding for Natives; Indian Health Policies; Mental Health and Native Peoples; Fetal Alcohol Syndrome; National Native Alcohol and

Drug Abuse Programs; Health Careers and Natives and dealing with stress in the work place.

The organization is still in its infancy, but promises to spread across Canada like wildfire. Anyone desiring to learn more about them and their work should write to Jean Goodwill, RN, President, In-

dian and Inuit Nurses of Canada, Suite 500, 222 Queen St., Ottawa, Ontario K1P-5V9, Canada.

They came to meet and strengthen one another; to teach and to learn. They were literally surrounded by government officials and politicians trying to get their attention. They worked for days sorting

out issues and resolutions as well as making plans for the future.

Their strength and unity of purpose moved everyone who attended their conference and allowed each of us to walk away all the more confident and inspired knowing that the health of Canada's Natives is in Native hands.