

# Careage North Communicates-

## Home Communicates with Patients' Relatives Back Home

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A small plane circles above a remote Alaskan village. It lands and a handful of people board, one of them a Public Health nurse, another a patient en route to the Native hospital in Anchorage. The family of the departing patient stand quietly and watch as the plane lifts off and disappears.

Many weeks later they may ask: "What happened? Did the patient fall off the face of the earth? IS he alive and well? Sick people do not often write letters. Who is to write for them?"

In Anchorage, the immediate health problem is taken care of, but a patient may need further care. If a person is not sick enough to be in a hospital yet not strong enough to be sent home, he is sent to Careage North, a nursing home in Fairbanks. In some cases, he may indeed feel as if he has fallen off the face of the earth.

A report is now being sent back to the villages. It says that the patient has arrived at Careage North for treatment, tells from which hospital he came, and for what he is being treated. The villagers then know where to write and how to keep in touch.

The new form is the brain child of Eric Johnston, chief administrator at the brand new nursing facility in Fairbanks. It is sent to the public health nurses throughout the region and to whatever local news service is available in the area.

A few patients at Careage North will be there only twenty-four hours. Others will be there weeks or months. And still others will never see the village again. They will live out the rest of their lives at Careage North.

The majority of the patients are elderly. But some are in their twenties, their thirties, forties, and fifties, and there have been children as young as eleven. About fifty per cent of the patients are Native. The other fifty per cent are not. Some of the patients are able to walk and are reasonably able

to care for most of their needs. Others are in wheelchairs and can do very little. Some are bright and mentally alert. One or two are retarded and some are senile.

There is no such thing as a cross-section of patients. Careage North has no uniform humanity. Each patient is unique, each must be treated according to his own special requirements.

Under this unwieldy structure, the staff is still searching for ways to improve the care and quality of life at Careage North for all patients. No one has any easy answers but they seem willing to face the questions.

"What are the goals of the home?" they asked one another at a recent staff meeting. "How do you define those goals when the patients are not equally capable of participating in them?"

Administrators, nurses, health aides, kitchen staff, maintenance and transportation staff, activities director, and physical therapist all sat down together to deal with the problems of their large "family."

"The lighting in the living room is bad... Can we improve it? ... Can the staff sit down and take meals with the patients? ... How well do we check on a new patient on the first day when they're sitting in their room, lonely and maybe scared? ... Could we have a social hour and serve wine in the evenings? ... Can we have a dog?"

Solving the lighting problem is easy. Serving wine is a bit more complex, as some patients have an alcohol problem. It was decided to let a "patient council" set the rules about drinks — who can have them and how many. A dog? The answer was no, except as an outdoor pet. The reason? Sanitation.

For the staff, the answers are not always easy. For the older people of the village, the adjustment to life in a large, modern nursing home in Fairbanks is not always easy.

Simon Pilot, blind for 45 years, has spent most of his life in Tanana and Ruby. Simon is amazingly independent and likes to be on his own as much as possible. At Careage North, he misses walking around outside as he used to do in the village.

Grandma Belle Luke, 91, prefers to take a cold bath every morning by her bed from a pitcher and commode as she has been doing for years and years. "This is fine with us," said the nurses. "She is the cleanest patient we have."

Several of the native women do laundry in their rooms. Once, when one woman was put in traction, the nurses came in and found she had strung her laundry all up and down the traction ropes. Before she would let them take it down, they had to make sure it was dry.

This kind of independence is welcome at Careage North.

"When I first came to work here," said Pam Daniell, a health aide, "you pushed independence, teaching the patients to do things for themselves. I don't think we should treat them like children. Sometimes they do feel like children and they're not!"

As an experiment in what it feels like to be a patient, Pam checked herself into Careage North for several days. The experiment provided some important insights into patient needs.

"Being in a wheelchair," she said, "I talked to patients I

hadn't even been able to get close to before... the fact that I was sitting down instead of towering over them."

One of her discoveries was that good care is not enough. "I got great care," she said. "As far as care goes, we're really up there. But the biggest hang-up is the emotional part and the social part."

"When a patient is first admitted, they have a lot of things on their mind. We treat them like they've been here forever. On that first day, we should make frequent trips into the room. Many new patients will not turn on their light to call you because they don't want to bother anyone!"

The staff felt there was not enough activity for the patients in the evening. "Some patients go to bed at 7 p.m. just because they have nothing to do," said one of the nurses. "There is too much time that they spend lying in bed, worrying about their problems."

Almost all of the staff agreed that patients could be divided, with one wing for the more capable and responsible. These should be allowed more privileges and freedom, including forming their own "patient council."

Activity is a major concern. Patients who have nothing to do sink into depression and do not get well. Bonnie Altenheim, activities director, has initiated several successful programs. One example is the bi-weekly visit of the Headstart children, covered in last week's Tundra Times.

Of all the activities, the most important one of all cannot be planned — having visitors. Visitors and news of home are a must. Plans are currently in the making to establish better liaison with the Fairbanks Native Center, whereby once or twice a week someone from the Center will pick up one or two of the patients and take them into town for a visit. People from the center will also visit the home.

This exchange between native organizations and nursing home is more than social. The old are the repository of a culture. Michell Andre, age 82 of Kaltag, is said to be the only living man who knows and can sing all of the songs for the Nulato Stick Dance. Many of the old speak dialects of a language that is dying out.

When the Alaska natives sought a settlement of their aboriginal land claims, there was much concern that the old people should realize some of the benefits of the settlement before their death. Many had watched as more and more of the old traditions and old ways died out.

One spokesman for Native people has said, "The old are needed in the villages to teach us the old ways, to keep our culture alive."

He raised the question, "Could there be a home for older Native people in each village with a Native health aide trained to care for them in all but serious illnesses?"

The white man's plane flies into the village, picks up the children and takes them away to outside schools. Then it comes back and takes away the old people to hospitals in the cities. NEXT WEEK: The story of Simon Pilot, blind for 45 years, born near Koyukuk, Alaska in 1908, and of Simon's fight to learn to write in Braille so that he might begin to write down the stories and legends of his childhood. It is the story of one patient at Careage North. There are many others.



**WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A PATIENT** — Pam Daniell, left, a health aide at Careage North checked in as a patient for several days to gain insights into patient problems. "Being in a wheelchair," she said, "I talked to patients I hadn't even been able to get close to before." After the experiment Pam chatted with Bessie Barr, a real patient.



**HARD-WON INDEPENDENCE** — Simon Pilot, born in 1908, is one of two patients who go out to work each day. Simon and his friend, Joe Joseph, both work at Hope Industries refinishing furniture. What is extraordinary is that Simon has been blind for 45 years! Here he polishes and sands a piece of ivory in the hobby shop on his off-hours.



**MEMORIES OF OTHER TIMES** — Bessie Solomon like many of the patients has time to sit and recollect a way of life that is vanishing in Alaska. Native groups, anthropologists, researchers, and writers sometimes come to the home to interview patients who have unique knowledge of "things remembered".



**WOMEN LIKE TO GET TOGETHER** — In a hallway at Careage North, "village visiting" goes on. Three Indian women — Lucy John, Belle Luke, and Bessie Solomon — chat with one another in their native Athabascan language.