

# Infectious diseases pose threat

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Infectious diseases which may go undetected for months can be extremely serious in small, rural communities, according to health experts at the 25th annual U.S. Public Health Service Professional Association's conference

held in Anchorage recently.

The international group of more than 600 public health professionals gathered at the Sheraton Anchorage Hotel for the four-day conference last week.

The conference also was attended by the nation's new surgeon general, Dr. Antonia Novello. She is also

America's first woman surgeon general.

Health issues discussed were ones which may have an effect on nearly every person in the world some day. Diseases such as AIDS, HIV and hepatitis were number one topics of

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concern.

These are diseases which can be acquired and go undetected for months. And they can be fatal to small rural communities that are at high risk of getting these diseases.

Dr. George Conway who works at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, said many Alaska Natives and American Indians who have the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or Human Immunodeficiency Virus (the virus that can cause AIDS), is much greater than what is actually being reported.

He said this is because race is not reported correctly on many death certificates for Alaska Natives or American Indians. He said many are just accounted for as white.

"HIV is more severe in Indians and Alaska Natives. A large percent of AIDS cases are uncounted," Conway said.

He said because of the miscount there is believed to be a 91 percent increase of the HIV/AIDS among American Indians and Alaska Natives since 1985.

According to state of Alaska statistics, as of Dec. 31, 1989, 303 Alaskans have tested positive for HIV. Of those, 80 are confirmed to have AIDS and 49 have died.

Also some researchers have estimated that 1,000 people per day in the United States are becoming infected with HIV. On a worldwide basis, there are more than 26 million reported cases of HIV.

And according to experts, this number is a large miscount because some countries don't report HIV or AIDS cases at all.

Another topic of great importance to Alaska Natives discussed at the conference was hepatitis. It is reported that there are 250 million people around the world who are chronically infected with the disease and in the United States nearly 300,000 people get it each year.

Alaska Natives are reported to be at a higher risk than other minorities of getting the hepatitis A and B virus.

It's reported that immigrants are also at higher risk than other groups.

Dr. Harold Margolis said the whole system of how people are getting hepatitis needs to be re-examined and exactly what racial groups are at higher risk also needs to be looked at. Then he said a new strategy for controlling it can be worked out.

Since 1982, Margolis said, Alaska Natives have acquired the virus 6-8 percent more than other groups.

He said hepatitis in many villages in Alaska has reached epidemic proportions.

Other topics discussed were treatment of various diseases, environmental health, tobacco, injury control and many other health related issues.

Next year the public health convention is scheduled to be held in Atlanta.