

Help us form policies

By Ted Mala, MD

Tundra Times

Question: How many people are there in the typical Inuit family?

Answer: Five. A mother, a father, two children and a researcher in the corner of their home watching them.

Alaska Natives are among the most studied people in the world.

I am told that in 1979 alone that there were more than 100 different universities armed with millions of federal dollars doing research studies in Alaska.

The strange thing is that many of them do their work here and then disappear as quickly as they arrived, most of us never learning what their findings were or ever to see them again.

I learned that lesson first hand when I was working on a grant in 1982 with UAA's Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies. My job included going before city councils and school boards to ask their permission to conduct a drug use study in their communities. People would tell me how tired they were of being studied with absolutely nothing coming back to the community.

Before going on further, I would like to say that there are good and bad researchers in this world. The trick is to be able to tell the difference between the good guys and the bad ones.

Surveys and numbers are what governments and universities live for. Studies are like photographs: they freeze a community's thoughts and actions for that instant in which the question is asked.

You could contemplate and change your mind the next day but once the answers are written down, that is the way people are going to say you think.

A good researcher will try to get a fair sample of the whole community's feelings.

If for example I wanted to find out how many people in Alaska fished for King Crab and I only asked crab fishermen in Kodiak that question, then my study would show that everyone I surveyed said that they were crab fishermen. The truth is of course that only a small amount of Alaskans fish for crab.

So you can see that it is easy in a study to give people the wrong impression if you only ask people who will tell you what you want to hear.

This is what happened in Barrow several years ago when researchers from the University of Pennsylvania did a quick and unfair study up North and gave their community a bad name all over the nation.

These kinds of incidents tend to make us want to slam the doors of our communities to all research. So what does that mean to the researchers who are legitimate and honest? After all, certain studies are really important and do bring back much to us in the form of improvements in health and living conditions as well as correcting world opinion in certain areas.

So you might ask, why doesn't someone do something about all of this? Well, the answer is, someone is starting to.

One morning in March I received a telephone call from Dr. John Middaugh, the state epidemiologist (the chief doctor who investigates outbreaks of diseases) asking if I would be the chairman of the Medical Issues Section of the Arctic Health Science Policy Task Force. I asked, what was that all about?

On February 10, 1983, Sen. Murkowski introduced Senate Bill 373 to give the United States a comprehensive national policy dealing with the Arctic. Health is just one section of this important document which is further divided into Behavioral Health, Medi-

cal Issues, Environmental Aspects, Research Opportunities and Resource Needs.

What all this means is that we as Alaskans want to have some say as to who does research in our state and that we want to put all of their findings together into one resource center.

In this way, whomever needs information on any Arctic subject can go to one information center to find out what has been done in that area and who in our state to ask for further follow up. Why do unnecessary research if the answers you are looking for are already out there?

Furthermore, I feel that it is only polite and ethical that people wanting to do some kind of study ask the community for its permission first so that they have some say as to who comes in and studies what.

What can you do if you want to have your say on Arctic Health Policies? After all, they have not been drawn up yet. We need to know what your thoughts are as well as to identify people whom we can contact as experts on the Arctic.

Please send us as soon as possible the names of anyone you think should be involved with us or should be on our mailing list. Send all names and comments to committee coordinator, Mr. Don DeMers, Human Resources Planning, Municipality of Anchorage, Pouch 6-650, Anchorage, AK. 99502. His phone number is 264-4261. Don will give your comments to the rest of the group.

This is *your* chance to have your say and include your thoughts on how all of this should be done. There are so many experts living both in and out of Alaska that we need to know about. After all, this is a policy we will have to live with for a long time to come.