

FRITZ ELUCIDATES HEALTH NEEDS

(Editor's Note: The following letter was written by State Representative Milo H. Fritz, M.D., to Grass Roots Aide John Angaiak of Tununak in response to questions raised by Angaiak about health services for Natives in Alaska).

Dear Mr. Angaiak:

This is to answer your letter of the 28th of February which just arrived here where I am a Legislator representing District 8 and I hope particularly the Native people of rural Alaska.

I will now answer your questions.

The ANHS hospitals are effective. But they are not nearly as effective as they would be were they controlled by people from Alaska. As it is, their policies are determined in Washington. They are overstaffed, inefficient, poorly managed, and are really a disgrace to the community.

The negative attitude of the people running ANHS hospitals is occasioned by their lack of need to be responsive to the needs of the people. In other words, if they were dependent upon the approval of the people of Alaska or lose their jobs, you may be sure that they would smarten up considerably. As it is, they can laugh at us since they get their direction and their money from Washington, D.C.

I think that when peoples of Native villages are told that it is illegal for them to take up a collection of money to bring an ANHS dentist there because the ANHS doesn't have money to send the dentist itself, I think that is negative. I think that if you inquired among the mothers and fathers of the villages as to what kind of treatment their youngsters are getting, they will tell you how negative the approach of the ANHS hospitals are.

Further, I have a letter on my desk from November, 1966, from the School nurse at the Beltz high school in Nome saying that about 60% of the kids going to the Beltz school either need eyeglasses, hearing aids or both! How negative can you get?

I do not understand what you mean by a graphic ratio to patient to non-patient. If you mean, are there lots of people needing simple medical care who are not getting it, let's say that there are plenty of them. I also know that the Alaska Native Health Service does not use to anywhere near its proper percent the availability of doctors like myself who are able, willing and ready to serve as consultants as I have done, sometimes with their help and sometimes in spite of their help and sometimes in opposition to them, as you remember in St. Mary's four years ago.

All hospitals nowadays lose money. Nevertheless, because private hospitals have to lose as little money as possible, their operations are far more efficient than the government sponsored hospitals.

There are two reasons for their being one dentist for 11,000 people. In the first place, no dentist could make a living because the people are poor. Secondly, the Alaska Native Health Service and its parent organization, the United States Public Health Service, rigidly refuse to train Native people in the small villages how to be Native dentists. There was one who died a few years ago named Jimmy Otiyahok at Gambell. In two summers, that is, about twelve weeks' instruction, he learned how to fill teeth beautifully and extract them neatly. His village was a model compared to all the others that I have seen where there are no dentists. A program like this could be developed by the Alaska Dental Association and the people practicing in the villages would not be allowed to move around else, needless to say, poor dentistry would result everywhere. If dental assistants trained like this were restricted to the village of their choice, then the dental health of the people would be very much improved.

When I went back in 1961 to Saint Mary's and did those 71 tonsil operations in five days, the noise coming out of the

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Alaska Native Health Service went to the effect that it was unsafe to do these operations in hospitals like those at Bethel, Kotzebue, Barrow and places like that. I maintain that if I, alone, one single doctor with the help of the nurses and the Jesuit Fathers could do 71 operations safely in five days, surely they ought to be able to do operations year in and year out safely at the hospitals. As the result of that, 600 newspapers learned of the event and the Alaska Native Health Service had to hire a well-trained United States Public Health Service ENT doctor who did about 3,000 tonsil and adenoid operations before they finally sent him back to the States after all the excitement from the St. Mary's episode had died down.

I am a Republican. However, all your representatives, John Westdall, Willie Hensley, Jules Wright, Tom Balone, all are convinced that I am very, very deeply interested in the health of the Natives no matter what their politics may be. Your, yourself, having experienced what I can do, surely do you think that I was influenced by political motives?

I would very much like you to have this letter reproduced and give it to whomever you wish, because I am willing to stand up and explain further if anybody wants any more explanations either on the radio, in print, or on television.

What the doctors in Anchorage told you, I have no way of knowing. Realize that most of these young men are just serving two years as a debt to their country, which all doctors must pay sometime after they graduate. If they make a lot of noise and say a lot of bad things about their superiors, who are permanent officials in the Alaska Native Health Service, you may be sure that they will have a tough two years. Hence, it is best for them to keep their mouths shut, put in their two years, and get out as soon as they can. This also explains why few good men stay in the Alaska Native Health Service or other government services when they can do better or be happier or both in private practice.

I am making every effort to do a creditable job so that the people's children in the villages will get to school with their eyes and ears and bodies in as good condition and their minds working as well as the youngsters who get to go to school in the cities as Anchorage, Juneau and Fairbanks. Thanking you very deeply for your concern and interest and taking the time to write a letter, I remain

Yours sincerely,

Milo H. Fritz, M.D.