

Forty years later, iodine-131 experiment causes ailments

Associated Press Writer

ANCHORAGE (AP) - The head of a medical team that fed radioactive drugs to Alaska Natives in the 1950s said Monday some people benefited by detection and treatment of a medical ailment, while others weren't hurt by the low dosages.

Kaare Rodahl, a retired Norwegian doctor and professor, said iodine-131 pills were used by researchers to diagnose endemic goiter in a number of residents of Anaktuvuk Pass and Arctic Village.

"We wanted to try to help. We gained nothing from this," said Rodahl, 75, told the AP in Oslo. "I was a medical man. It was my ethical duty to try to help them."

The illness was discovered during a series of Air Force-commissioned studies over a two-year period to try to determine why Natives adjusted so well to Arctic temperatures.

A 1957 report on the studies said Eskimos and Athabascan In-

dians from four villages were given iodine-131 in 50-microcurie doses over a two-year period to test the impact on their thyroid glands.

Villagers from Fort Yukon and Wainwright were also included in the Air Force study, as were a group of white soldiers.

Some of the subjects have said recently they didn't know the nature of the tests, U.S. Sen. Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska, on Monday called for an investigation.

The report cited a high incidence of thyroid enlargements associated with goiter in Anaktuvuk Pass and Arctic Village. It said tracer doses of the iodine were given, followed by treatment with potassium iodide, which is not radioactive.

Goiter is an enlargement of the thyroid gland, which regulates body growth and metabolism. It is caused by a dietary deficiency of iodine.

Rodahl, then director of research for the Air Force's Arctic Area

Medical Laboratory in Fairbanks, said Eskimos and Indians in the villages were given one dose of iodine-131.

Dr. Ward Hurlburt, chief medical officer at the federal Alaska Area Native Health Service in Anchorage, said endemic goiter was common in Interior Alaska in those days due to a lack of dietary iodine.

Rodahl said the exposure to radioactivity from the studies was negligible, and likely less than that received by Eskimos and Indians in fallout from Soviet atomic testing in the 1950s.

Bob Ahgook, an Inupiat Eskimo from Anaktuvuk Pass who took part in the study, said he thought the Air Force doctors were studying Eskimo diets. He said doctors didn't tell him the pills were radioactive.

"I wasn't aware of (the doctors) telling me about (the pills)," the 63-year-old Ahgook said Monday. "I didn't recognize what the pill was they gave to me."

Ahgook said he didn't remember getting sick from the experiments.

Rodahl challenged Ahgook's memory, saying the Eskimos "were very happy to help. They knew what we were doing.... They were told everything."

Dr. Dawn Varney of the University of Washington's Dept. of

"Nobody should ever be treated like a human guinea pig. This may be an example of Cold War secrecy and paranoia running wild."

Nuclear Medicine said 50-microcurie doses were appropriate for tracer doses and caused no side effects. She said iodine-131 is used for treatment in doses more than a thousand times stronger.

Varney said the half-life of io-

dine-131 was eight days.

Murkowski has asked the National Academy of Sciences to look into the testing.

"Nobody should ever be treated like a human guinea pig," Murkowski said in a statement. "This may be an example of Cold War secrecy and paranoia running wild."

News of the iodine-131 testing marks the second case of radioactive exposure involving Alaska Natives to come to light in the past eight months.

In September, it was revealed that scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey brought about 15 pounds of radioactive waste to the northwest Alaska coast in 1962 to test how radiation behaved in an Arctic environment.

The waste, buried under a mound of dirt after the testing, has been blamed by nearby Natives for an increased incidence of cancer in the area. The waste is scheduled to be excavated and shipped to Washington state this summer.