

Native teens healthy but accident prone

By Ted Mala, MD

Tundra Times

I was on my way to the University Chancellor's office for a meeting recently and heard a man out of breath loudly calling my name. I turned around and saw Anthropologist Steve Langdon running after me after coming down several flights of stairs from his office as fast as he could. "Are you free this afternoon, Ted, for an interview? There is someone here from U.S. News and World Report that needs some information about Alaska Natives."

Later that day I met "Mack" Chrysler, the Senior West Coast Editor for the magazine and the interview began. It turns out that Mack was originally from Canada and later moved to the United States and has been in the reporting business for 22 years. He also has been coming up our way every year or two for quite a while now.

His questions were sincere and to the point. How had the Native Land Claims Act affected the quality of lives of Alaska Natives?

He was basically looking at economics but wanted to put something in about how our

health is and what we die of. He wanted numbers and facts, not just opinions.

I had to excuse myself so that I could spend the next day in the library researching "numbers." Some of what I discovered was even a surprise to me.

There is no question in anyone's mind that Alaska Natives are healthier in pre-teen years than ever. Thanks to our health aides and regional health corporations, the Indian Health Service and the State Public Health Division, healthy babies are being born and growing into their teen years without problems.

Wait a minute. Let's look at that sentence once again. Everything is fine until those teen years and then something happens.

Did you know that half of all deaths due to accidents and injuries happen to Natives between the ages of 15-30?

Did you also know that the highest Native suicide rates are in the age groups of 15-24 and 25-34 years old and that seventy percent of this group is male? That most men used firearms, explosives or hanging to take their lives and most women used poisoning? And that

most of these suicides occurred in December and the lowest rate was between August and September? That Alaska Native suicide rates have gone up since the mid-'60's and currently are three times higher than the rest of the nation, including American Indians!

At the rate that we are having children, the Alaska Native population should double in a little over 30 years. Our current rate is the same as it was in 1950, but much healthier now. At present, most Natives marry another Native but that, too, is changing.

When one parent is Native, it is usually the mother but Native fathers are catching up. If this trend continues, Native health services might have to be limited to those with one quarter or more Native blood. But that's a subject for another article.

Most (98 percent) of Native babies are delivered by health professionals and the problem of low birth weights is down from what it used to be. Most births take place when the

woman is between 20-24 and then the rate goes down each year thereafter.

The average age of most Alaska Natives is about 18 years old, while the rest of the U.S. is about 30 years old. This is due to the use of birth control which was introduced on a large scale in the '60's.

Abortions in Natives were highest in 1973 and were usually done in teen years.

Native abortion rates are lower than state and national rates. The average life expectancy age for Natives is 69 years while the rest of the nation is about 76. Women live longer than men.

The number one cause of death in Alaska is accidents, especially in motor vehicle, water transport and accidental drownings. For the rest of the nation, it is number four!

Number two is heart disease and high blood pressure, which has gone up 30 percent since the '70's, yet is still smaller (15 percent) than the rest of the nation (in which 38 percent die from them).

And finally cancer, which in the male represents lung and large intestine cancer, and breast cancer in the female. Our cancer rate is still smaller than the rest of the U.S. population.

In our older age groups, many Natives die from influenza and pneumonia (four times more than the rest of the U.S.).

What does all this mean? Well, it seems to say that we will have a healthy time growing up, and if we can mentally take it through all the curses of being a teen and a young adult, then life should even out and we will make it into our seventies.

Together. Strong. Helping, listening and being there when someone else reaches out. For we are not ordinary people. We carry with us spirit and strength left to us by our ancestors down through the centuries.

We are the future.

We are Alaska Natives.

U.S. News and World Report, take note.