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Fort Chipewyan cancer study findings released

EDMONTON – A study of the cancer incidence in Fort Chipewyan finds levels of the rare cancer cholangiocarcinoma are not higher than expected. Of the six suspected cases reported by community physician Dr. John O'Connor, two are confirmed cases of cholangiocarcinoma. Upon review, three of the reported cases were found to be other cancers; another was not a cancer.

“The community was seriously concerned,” says Dr. Tony Fields, Vice President, Cancer Corridor, Alberta Health Services. “To address their concerns, Alberta Health Services undertook the most stringent analysis possible. This way, we can follow up on increased levels that are even borderline statistically significant.”

Fifty-one cancers in 47 individuals were found in Fort Chipewyan between 1995 and 2006, compared to 39 cancers expected. The cancers that were higher than expected were biliary tract cancers as a whole, cancers of the blood and lymphatic system, and soft tissue cancers. Only when biliary cancers were grouped together did they reach a significant level, three cases over a 12-year period. Other cancers were at or below expected levels.

“I believe the community should be reassured that numbers are not as high as reported,” says Fields. “These results were based on a small number of cases - there is no cause for alarm but there is an indication that continued monitoring and analysis are warranted.”

An increase in observed cancers over expected could be due to chance, to increased detection, or to increased risk (lifestyle, environmental or occupational) in the community.

“We will need to do ongoing monitoring in Fort Chipewyan over the coming years to see if these are continuing trends,” says Fields.

The study, conducted by Dr. Yiqun Chen, was reviewed by independent experts from Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, as well as two Canadian Aboriginal researchers, one of whom was recommended by the Nuneen Health Board Society in Fort Chipewyan.

“We are confident the study is sound,” says Dr. Fields. “Seldom does a scientific study answer all our questions. Instead, research often points us to where we need to look next. Working with the community we will take those next steps to finding answers.”

The complete report and reviewer comments are available at www.albertahealthservices.ca

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