THE GRASSY NARROWS & ISLINGTON BAND

MERCURY DISABILITY BOARD

A Historical Report 1986-2001

A CONDENSED VERSION

Len Manko

The Grassy Narrows & Islington Band Mercury Disability Board: A Historical Report 1986-2001

A Condensed Version

Prepared for:

The Grassy Narrows First Nation and Wabaseemoong Independent Nations Mercury Disability Board, Kenora, Ontario

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CESO Aboriginal Services

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Preface

The original report consists of three volumes. It was written by a university student, Sylvia Cosway, who was working on her PhD at the University of Manitoba. She was a nurse. She was hired to do a study on mercury poisoning in the communities of Grassy Narrows First Nation (Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishnabek) and the Wabaseemoong Independent Nations. The entire study covers over 400 pages in a language more suited to readers with special training in medicine and chemistry. This booklet is written in a simpler style. It avoids many highly technical terms as well most of the details useful primarily to professionals.

Most students and adults will get the main points of the report. If they need more information, they can refer to the Cosway Report, or else read any of the documents listed in its bibliography.

It is hoped that students as well as adults may be encouraged by this booklet to do special research on topics such as chemistry, effects of mercury poisoning on unborn children, symptoms of persons affected by mercury poisoning and other issues of personal or community interest.

The booklet pays special attention to: the history of mercury programs, including those run by the Disability Board and Health Canada; the background on methylmercury; research and diagnosis related to the effects of this chemical on humans and other living beings; agreements and laws set up between the communities named, the paper companies and governments to help people harmed by this poisonous substance; ways of finding out if persons have symptoms caused by mercury poisoning; and the story behind the effects of the contamination on Grassy Narrows First Nation and Wabaseemong Independent Nations. In order to simplify its reading, the booklet includes a short glossary. Words, or terms, that appear in different forms are referred to in one form only throughout the booklet.

Glossary

Cosway Report
Study that was done by Ms Cosway in 2001. The condensed version is referred to as the booklet, conceived purposely for the benefit of the First Nations membership immediately following

Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishnabek
Grassy Narrows First Nation

Wabaseemoong Independent Nations
Islington Band, White Dog Reserve

the damage

“In 1970, federal government agents reported that the English-Wabigoon River systems were contaminated with mercury. The source of contamination was Dryden Chemicals Limited, located at the Dryden Paper Company Limited in Dryden, Ontario. This plant had dropped over 20,000 lbs. of untreated mercury wastewater into the Wabigoon River between 1962 and 1970. The rivers and lakes downstream were contaminated for at least 250 kilometers.”

Background

In 1970, federal government agents reported to the commercial fishermen and tourist lodge owners on the English-Wabigoon River systems that the rivers were contaminated with mercury. The fish in the rivers were testing high for methylmercury, a highly toxic form of mercury. The fish were unsafe to eat for both humans and animals.

Later, it was learned that the source of contamination was Dryden Chemicals Limited, located at the Dryden Paper Company Limited in Dryden, Ontario. This plant had dropped over 20,000 lbs. of untreated mercury wastewater into the Wabigoon River between 1962 and 1970. The rivers and lakes downstream were contaminated for at least 250 kilometers.

This contamination forced one tourist lodge to close down. Commercial fishers lost their source of livelihood. This closure caused unemployment to people living at Grassy Narrows First Nation and Wabaseemoong Independent Nations reserves. Workers who depended on these activities to make their living had to turn to welfare. It was a severe hardship to these communities.

It should be noted that this was not the first disaster they experienced. In the 1950s, Ontario Hydro had flooded lands occupied by these people to build generating stations. Those displaced were relocated to various communities. On-reserve schools were built. Families that had normally traveled together on the trap lines became separated, for at least one parent had to stay behind with the children.

Aware of the possibility of getting compensation for loss of livelihood, the two First Nations immediately began to look into ways of getting financial assistance for its members. It took 16 years to achieve their goal.

In 1985, Wabaseemoong Independent Nations and Grassy Narrows First Nation made a settlement with the Federal Government, the province of Ontario, and two paper companies, for all claims due to mercury contamination in the English-Wabigoon River systems. On July 28, 1986, it was proclaimed law. The Act is formally called the "Grassy Narrows and Islington Indian Bands Mercury Pollution Claims Settlement Act, Bill C-110".

This law set up the Mercury Disability Fund. Members of these First Nations who display symptoms consistent with mercury poisoning could apply for funds to live on.

Mercury Poisoning: Over the World, Over the Centuries

Mercury is a heavy metal that occurs in liquid form at room temperature. Aristotle, a Greek scholar, named it quicksilver over 2000 years ago, because at room temperature it is a silver-colored liquid. Early physicians used it for medicinal purposes to treat diseases such as syphilis, and problems affecting the intestines, as well as other conditions.

Mercury poisoning was written about as early as the 15th century. Until the mid 1800s, poisoning resulted mostly from inhaling mercury vapors. In the 1840s, other man-made chemicals were known to cause poisoning.

Some workers were especially vulnerable to this poison, or toxin. Mercury was used by mirror makers. Chemists who came into contact with it in their labs were affected. Hatters, workers who were involved in the production of felt hats in the mid-19th century, were exposed to mercury nitrate. It was used to treat fur skins, such as beaver and rabbit, to make felt hats, thus perhaps the saying, "mad as a hatter". The children's book, Alice in Wonderland, is said by some to refer to these victims of mercury poisoning.

Major Outbreaks of Methylmercury Poisoning

Methylmercury is a substance made from mercury when it is combined with other chemicals, such as chlorine. Fish ate polluted foods poisoned by these substances. Grain treated with chemicals to control diseases affecting its kernels also poisoned people who ate them.

Some of the countries hit by this disease include Japan, 1953-65, Iraq, 1971-72, Pakistan, 1969, and Ghana, 1969. The most notable outbreaks occurred in Japan and Iraq.

The first recorded large-scale outbreak happened in Japan. The first four cases of the then mysterious disease were presented at the Minamata Health Centre in 1956. Mercury was involved in the process used by the industrial plants. They allowed the release of mercury-contaminated wastewater into Minimata Bay. Fish and shell fish were poisoned. Humans who ate them were consequently subject to this disease, now known as the Minimata disease. As of 1995, 2,200 people have been officially recognized as having this disease and over 10,000 displayed its symptoms. These were the first recorded cases of mercury poisoning contacted through the aquatic, or water, food chain.

The world's use of mercury has increased dramatically since World War II. It is used in many industries: agriculture, electrical, paint, leather tanning as well as paper production, to name just a few. Dentists used it for tooth fillings. Thermometers were made, using this compound.

In 1969 and 1970, scientists discovered that various kinds of fish from many lakes and rivers in Ontario, Quebec, Saskatchewan and Manitoba tested positive for unsafe levels of methylmercury. Lakes in Ontario mentioned regularly at this time included Lake St. Clair, Lake Erie, Clay Lake, as well as others. Over 200 lakes, scientists reported, were being monitored by Ontario government agencies.

People working and living on the English-Wabigoon River systems, studies showed, were being affected in ways similar to that of people in other parts of the world. The Royal Commission on the Northern Environment, 1977-78, established by the Ontario government, drew attention to the plight of those living on the two reserves under study. This was only one of the reasons that favorable legislation was finally passed in 1986.

the element

“Animals and humans, who had eaten a lot of fish over a long period of time, were seriously affected. The Dryden Mill dumped a lot of chemical waste, or effluent, into the rivers. The poison that resulted was very harmful to the food in the food chain eaten by residents of the English- Wabigoon River systems.”

Methylmercury

Mercury is an element. An element is a substance that cannot be broken down chemically into a simpler form, for example, hydrogen, or oxygen. These elements can be changed by a scientist, who has special knowledge, to form water. They can also be changed by a totally natural process. Water is a compound. It is a substance formed when more than one element is changed chemically, as happens when hydrogen, an element, is combined with another element, oxygen, to form water, a compound. In the case of methylmercury, mercury joins with carbon and hydrogen to form methylmercury.

This transformation, or change, happens by a process called methylation. Bacteria in river sediment cause mercury deposited in wastewater from chemical plants, such as the Dryden Mill, to change into this poisonous compound. Live creatures, such as fish and shellfish, eat it. Humans and animals in turn eat them. If the poisons are of a sufficiently high concentration, they can be harmful to both.

Animals and humans, who had eaten a lot of fish over a long period of time, were seriously affected. The Dryden Mill dumped a lot of chemical waste, or effluent, into the rivers. The poison that resulted was very harmful to the food in the food chain eaten by residents of the English- Wabigoon River systems.

Mercury Programs

The term, Mercury Program, is at times used incorrectly. Some use it to describe the program run by the two First Nations through the Mercury Disability Board. In fact, the Mercury Program was set up in Ottawa in 1975 by the Medical Services Branch of Health Canada. It was designed to monitor levels of methylmercury exposure in targeted First Nations and Inuit communities. The process involves the collection of hair and blood samples from residents of these communities at regularly scheduled times. A person hired by this program coordinates the collection of samples.

The samples are analyzed and stored in Ottawa. It is to be noted that the results are not shared with the Mercury Disability Board. That is, hair and blood sample data, gathered in Wabeseemoong Independent Nations and Grassy Narrows First Nation by the Mercury Program, are not considered in Mercury Disability Board decisions regarding disability claims of residents of these two First Nations.

The Mercury Disability Board is specific only to the Grassy Narrows First Nation and Wabaseemoong Independent Nations.

At the date of publication of Ms Cosway's report, this federal program has done 72,556 tests on 40,634 people in the 529 communities involved. The 1978 report shows that 2.54% of the population was at risk. The second group of results showed a large decrease to 0.4% at risk. The third report in 1999 shows a continuing decrease in contamination. It is not clear whether there are fewer contaminated fish, or whether people are eating fewer fish.

Research

Mercury and methylmercury have been the subject of much research in the last half century. There have been local, national and international conferences, research studies and many reports of various kinds.

For example, the American Environmental Protection Agency published a report of some 2000 pages on the state of mercury and methylmercury compounds. Where do they come from, what are their health effects, how are the bad effects controlled, what are the costs from damage they cause to society?

These kinds of studies are now called epidemiology; causes of disease; keeping watch over diseases; as well as measures to control threats to health. As may be expected, some of the earliest studies came out of Japanese research facilities.

The Nigata Report (1967) is available in Japanese in Japan.

The Minimata Report (1968) lists 182 papers and reports published by Kumamoto University in Japan. This report shows that between 1953 and 1965, 111 patients had been diagnosed with Minimata disease. Forty-one died. There was, however, a big increase in the 0 to 9 years age group. 22 of these children got poisoning of the fetus during pregnancy. Mothers had eaten fish and shellfish affected by mercury poisoning.

In 1967, the Swedish government ordered a study of health risks caused by the eating of fish affected by mercury/methylmercury contamination. Tests of fish showed elevated levels of toxins in some bodies of water. Many industries were using mercury in different ways, in the manufacture of cellulose, in the chlorine industry, in the electrical industry to make switches, fluorescent lamps, dry batteries, in the paint industry, in the making of instruments such as thermometers, barometers and aerometers. Hospital drains were also affected.

Sweden had started the use of mercury in agriculture as a fungicide to prevent damage to seed grain. Mercury compounds were used to treat fruit trees. In 1966, the government banned the use of these chemicals after scientists discovered toxic effects on birds.

In addition to the Ontario Royal Commission on the Northern Environment, there was a significant study done by McGill University. It focused on Crees living in northwestern Quebec. 9,592 members of the Great Whale River, Mistassini and Waswanipi First Nations were subjects of study.

Other studies are identified. A study in New Zealand focused on children who were exposed to methylmercury while in the mothers' womb. 11,000 new mothers and babies were examined. 1,000 women reported eating fish at least three times a week. Children whose mothers' hair samples averaged 13-15 mgs/kg (milligrams per kilogram) showed poorer results in intelligence tests than is normal.

Diagnosis

There are scientific tests used to find out if people show signs of some form of mercury poisoning.

The scientific method for finding out about human exposure to natural (mercury) and synthetic (man made) chemicals is based on sampling and analysis of a person's tissues and fluids. Substances studied include blood, urine, breast milk, expelled air, as well as hair, fat, and bone.

The kidneys generally contain the highest amounts of methylmercury in humans. High levels may lead to kidney damage and failure. Testing urine levels is important in finding out about negative effects on our nervous system; persons affected may show signs of irritation, shaking (tremor), kidney damage, and other symptoms known by scientists to be consistent with mercury poisoning. Exposure to methylmercury is often measured and monitored by testing blood samples. Scientists have found a close link between the eating of an unsafe amount of contaminated fish and mercury levels in blood.

The relationship between methylmercury exposure, health effects and hair has been well established. Methylmercury poisoning occurs mostly in food. This compound is absorbed by a person's blood. Eventually it becomes a part of a person's hair and is a good indicator of the consumption of this contaminated food. It is said to be particularly useful in gauging consumption of contaminated fish by pregnant mothers.

Treatment for Mercury Poisoning

One method of treatment for mercury poisoning is chelation.

Chelate is a chemical that attracts a metal to it instead of being attracted to human tissue, such as the brain and nervous tissue.

Eventually this mixture of chelate and mercury is sent out of the body as waste, for example, urine. However, some scientists are saying that there is not enough proof that this therapy is truly useful in the reversing of mercury toxin. More research is needed.

the legislation

> “The agreement outlined by the Memorandum of Understanding of 1985 set up the Mercury Disability Fund. Its purpose was to provide First Nations members with an avenue to apply for individual compensation should they have, or would develop in the future, symptoms or diseases consistent with mercury poisoning. The agreement specifically states that each of the First Nations was to receive $1,000,000 plus interest gained for purposes of compensation to those affected by mercury poisoning.”

Agreements and Legislation: Their Background

In 1969 and 1970, it was discovered that various kinds of fish from many rivers and lakes in Ontario tested positive for unsafe levels of methylmercury. Levels in Clay Lake, Umfreville Lake, Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie were over what was considered safe, that is, above 5 parts per million (0.5ppm). In April 1971, the Ontario Minister of Lands and Forests declared that over 200 provincial lakes were being continuously tested. Similar monitoring was happening in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Quebec.

Members of both governments, in Ontario and in Ottawa, debated this problem at length from 1970 to 1985. These debates are contained in what is known as the Hansard Reports. There was a lot of disagreement amongst the various political parties at both levels. Overall, there was a debate on all the data related to the bodies of polluted water in Ontario, including the English-Wabigoon Rivers.

To complicate matters, there were other organizations, besides the two governments, and the two bands involved in this legal dispute, or litigation. Five different parties played a separate role in resolving the matter of compensation caused by mercury poisoning.

The Cosway Report devotes many pages to the various steps involved in arriving at the final agreements in July 1986. This section in the Report, pages 33 to 56, makes interesting reading to those with a particular interest in our system of resolving complicated matters at the parliamentary level. For the needs of this booklet, a short summary is given.

The debate in the Ontario legislature was at times very lively. The same was true of Parliament in Ottawa. Many sides of the question of compensation to fishers and other people were debated at length. The first specific mention of mercury contamination of rivers in northwestern Ontario occurred on June 17th, 1970. It took over 16 years to reach agreement amongst the five parties involved.

In November of 1973, the federal Member of Parliament for Kenora-Rainy River, explained the socio-economic impact on the residents of the two First Nations involved. He appealed for a generous aid package to help the plaintiffs.

At various times, some member of parliament or other raised the issue of compensation; however, in June 1984 there was still no compensation.

In 1977, the two First Nations started legal actions against Reed Limited, Dryden Chemicals Limited and Dryden Paper Company Limited in the Supreme Court of Ontario.

The next year, The Royal Commission on the Northern Environment was established by the Ontario government. Its goal was to assess the effects major industries had on the northern environment and to make recommendations on alternative uses for resources in the north. It met with 14 communities, including Grassy Narrows First Nation and Wabaseemoong Independent Nations. Justice Hartt, the chairman, described their situation as intolerable and specifically named these two communities in one of the recommendations. It requested the appointment of a fact finder to recommend appropriate methods to ensure the setting up a solid economic base for both communities.

Because the regular political process was so slow, he said that a system of negotiation should be tried. In response to this recommendation, representatives of the government of Canada, the Province of Ontario and the two communities signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Dec. 15, 1978. All parties agreed to appoint a mediator to resolve the issues in dispute. Eight more years went by before all parties concerned signed the final agreement.

The agreements were ratified, or approved, by a very large majority of the First Nations members over 18 years of age.

The 5 parties agreed to financial compensation to them in the following amounts:

Government of Canada	$2.75 million
Province of Ontario	$2.17 million
Great Lakes Forest Products	$6.00 million
Reed Limited	$5.75 million
Total	**$16.67 million**

In 1997, the Province of Ontario contributed $6,000,000 to the Fund. Per legislation, in reality, the Province of Ontario is responsible to ensure that the Fund does not go below $100,000. In 2006, a new formula for replenishing the Mercury Disability Fund was announced by the Province of Ontario. Additional funds will be added to the Mercury Disability Fund annually based on calculations used to determine the disbursement for the upcoming year.

The agreement outlined by the Memorandum of Understanding of 1985 set up the Mercury Disability Fund. Its purpose was to provide First Nations members with an avenue to apply for individual compensation should they have, or would develop in the future, symptoms or diseases consistent with mercury poisoning. The agreement specifically states that each of the First Nations was to receive $1,000,000 plus interest gained for purposes of compensation to those affected by mercury poisoning.

The Mercury Disability Board was set up to administer the Fund, including final ruling on applications for compensation. The board consists of one chairperson, one member from each of the two First Nations, two physicians and two other persons appointed by the Search Committee, a part of whose duty it is to select Board members.

An administrator was appointed by the Attorney General of Ontario and approved by the Mercury Disability Board to administer the funds as set out by law. The administrator is the Great-West Life Assurance Company of Winnipeg. Awards vary from $250.00 to $800.00 per month. The Board has the authority to make a recommendation regarding an application and to review the determination of the administrator. The ruling of the Board is final.

A brochure, with the title, 'Mercury Disability Claims: How the Process Works', explains the application process in detail. Copies are available at the First Nations Council Offices, the Health Centers in both communities as well as from the Mercury Disability

Board office in Kenora. As of the publication of this report, October 2001, there have been 509 applications.

A First Nations member can initiate a claim by filling out an application form. An affidavit is also required. Under oath, the applicant swears to the truthfulness of the application. In addition, a person authorized by the First Nations Council must confirm that the applicant is a member. A medical examination is conducted by the Board-appointed neurologist. The required documents, accompanied by the Board's recommendation, are then sent to Great West Life for approval or denial. Great West has to send a letter to the applicant within 21 days, indicating whether approval or denial is the decision. If approval is given, a cheque is issued to the applicant. If a letter is sent saying that the application is not approved, the applicant has the right to appeal. The Board reviews the appeal. It then declares approval or denial of the review requested by the applicant. As of October 2001, there were a significant number of appeals.

Diagnostic Criteria

In the 1976, 1977 and 1979 a panel of experts conducted medical studies at Grassy Narrows First Nation and Wabaseemoong Independent Nations. As a result, these medical experts developed a grading system used even now as grading guidelines to determine whether or not, and to what degree, claimants would qualify for compensation. According to this grading system, or protocol, a 0 score indicates no evidence of mercury intoxication, 3 indicates certain organic mercury intoxication.

Persons of all ages were examined. In 1976, for example, 47.7% were neurologically abnormal, that is there was some brain or nervous system damage. The maximum score was not assigned to any participant in the study in either community. Once various abnormalities were determined, it was found that 16 residents of the Wabaseemoong Independent Nations and 12 residents of the Grassy Narrows First Nation were "assessed as having neurological abnormalities compatible with mercury intoxication."

As a result of these studies, an adult neuroassessment protocol was established. This 'guideline' pointed to 7 different categories of symptoms. For example, tremor, or shaking was one, incoordination was another. A four level scale was used: none, mild, moderate and severe, to determine how serious the condition was. Number values were also added to help with the grading system; 0-mild to 8, severe.

A separate protocol was established for children. Initially there were only 2 categories, cerebral palsy and mental retardation. Later they were revised to seven categories. Mild, moderate and severe were adopted as guidelines of severity. The number system for grading adult cases was also adopted. IQ, or intelligence tests, were used in the diagnosis. There was concern, however, that some of the children would have difficulty understanding words used in the tests.

Current adult guidelines are the ones recommended for use in 1985.

Benefit Entitlement

Claimants that scored six points or more during the clinical assessment were entitled to receive benefits. 82 applicants were awarded benefits based on their score (16%). The Board awarded benefits to 57 of the 148 (39%) claimants that submitted an appeal.

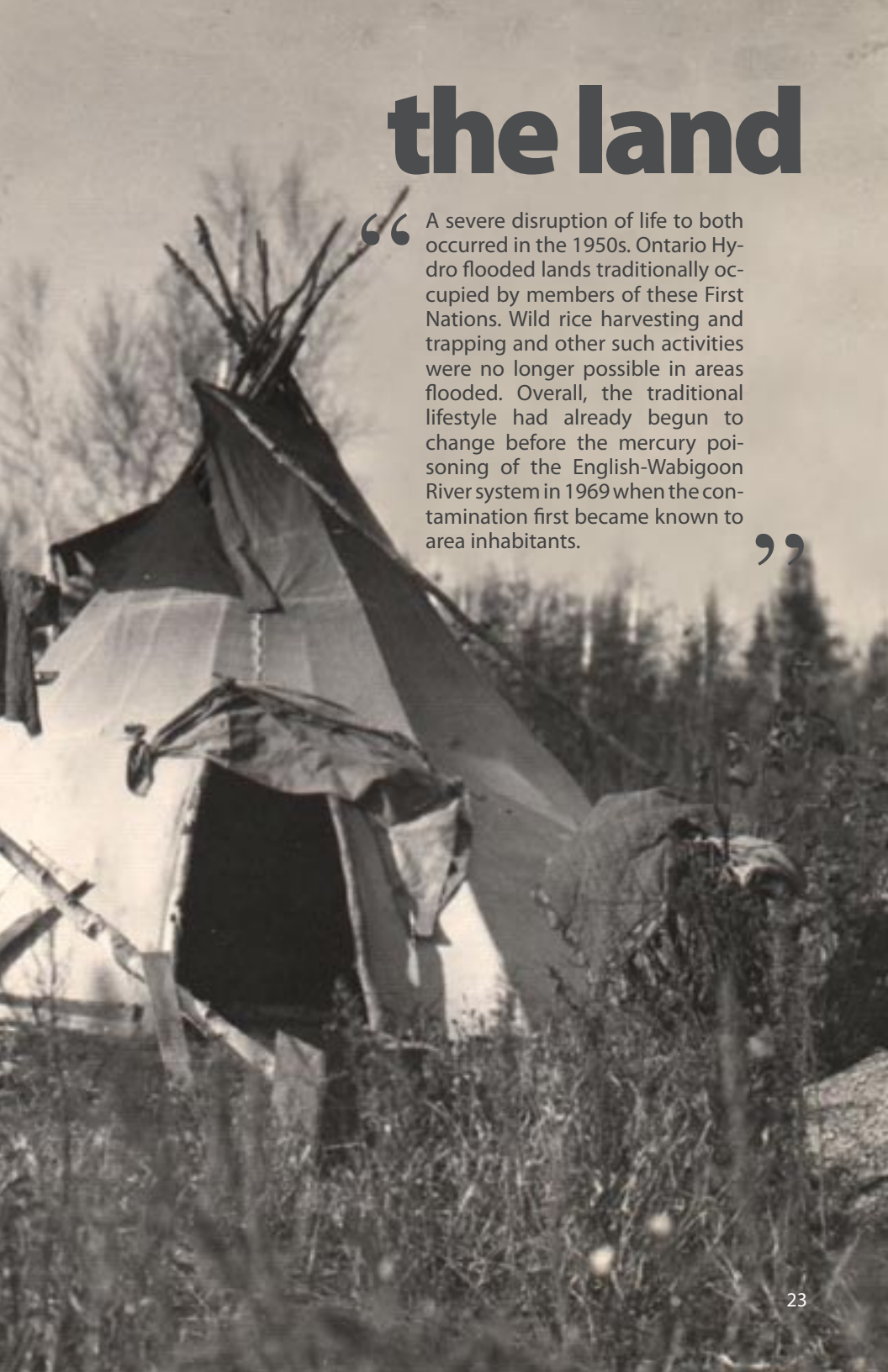
The amount of the benefit award for adults begins at $250.00. This is based on 6 points. Each point above that number entitles the claimant to $50.00 more per month to a maximum of 16 points, that is, $800.00 per month.

The minimum entitlement score for children was originally 8 points. The benefit award started at $400.00 per month. It went up by $200.00 for each 2 point increase to a limit of $800.00 per month (8 points). In 1999, pediatric neurologists revised the children's protocol and grading guidelines. Details can be found the Cosway Report.

As of 2001, 9 of 26 children claimants (35%) have been awarded benefits. The report states that a developing fetus and children after birth are most likely to be harmed by mercury poisoning. Some children do not show symptoms of this disease until they begin to walk and talk. Signs to be aware of include lack of co-ordination, e.g. stumbling, mental retardation, inability to move, seizures, muscle weakness, and inability to speak, to name a few.

Adults experience effects such as changes in ability to feel cold and heat, inability to walk, tremors, convulsions and even death in serious cases.

the land



“A severe disruption of life to both occurred in the 1950s. Ontario Hydro flooded lands traditionally occupied by members of these First Nations. Wild rice harvesting and trapping and other such activities were no longer possible in areas flooded. Overall, the traditional lifestyle had already begun to change before the mercury poisoning of the English-Wabigoon River system in 1969 when the contamination first became known to area inhabitants.”

The Communities of Grassy Narrows First Nation and Wabaseemoong Independent Nations

The Ojibwa ancestors of the current residents of Grassy Narrows First Nation and Wabaseemong Independent Nations lived in the area under study from time immemorial.

In October 3, 1873, Chief Saskatcheway and 24 other chiefs signed the North West Angle Treaty with the federal government.

In the years 1897-1903, the inhabitants of Indian Lake and Grassy Narrows became the community of Grassy Narrows. Nonetheless, in spite of these changes, the traditional lifestyle of hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering of berries, rice and other foods continued as usual.

In the 1890s, a devastating disease struck this region. Members of the Grassy Narrows area relocated to Indian Lake. Life, however, continued as usual for the next half century.

In 1963, the community of Grassy Narrows was officially relocated to its current location of Jones Road, about five miles from the original settlement. Federal policy required this move to enable residents to have access to improved roads, indoor plumbing, sewers, electricity and a new on-reserve school.

In spite of the supposed 'advantages' to the relocation, there were social upheavals. The activities of the traditional lifestyle were disrupted. The families could no longer travel as a cohesive family unit in pursuit of traditional livelihoods such as trapping, gathering, hunting, fishing, and harvesting. The values of independence and self-reliance were undermined. Respect for the land and nature was weakened. There was an increase in violence and alcohol abuse in both communities. Significant changes in the lives of residents of both First Nations occurred.

Wabaseemoong Independent First Nations had previously been known as the Islington Band or the Whitedog Reserve. It was made up of the communities of Whitedog, One Man Lake and Swan Lake.

Generally speaking, the residents of this area experienced a lifestyle similar to that of Grassy Narrows.

A severe disruption of life to both occurred in the 1950s. Ontario Hydro flooded lands traditionally occupied by members of these First Nations. Wild rice harvesting and trapping and other such activities were no longer possible in areas flooded.

Overall, the traditional lifestyle had already begun to change before the mercury poisoning of the English-Wabigoon River system in 1969 when the contamination first became known to area inhabitants.

Between 1920 and 1948, commercial fishing developed around the One Man Lake reserve. Hunting and fishing lodges encouraged tourists to visit the area. Pulpwood cutting provided an alternate source of income for some. Also, In the 1950s harvesting of green wild rice and winter ice fishing became a source of livelihood.

This is just a brief overview of the situation affecting both First Nations. They experienced a much more severe disruption in their ways of making a living after the discovery of mercury contamination. Commercial fishing was ruined. Hunting and fishing lodges were closed. For example, the Ball Lake Lodge used to employ almost all of the employable adults at Grassy Narrows, either on a full time or on a part time basis. It was closed in the summer of 1970. The lodge was not re-opened until 1990.

The settlement that was made into law in 1986 provided funding for economic development for both First Nations. A detailed account is found in the Cosway Report.

The legislation of July 1986 set up institutions that were supposed to provide employment opportunities for First Nations members.

With respect to Grassy Narrows First Nation, two corporations were set up to develop business activities. They oversaw such businesses as Ball Lake Lodge, Grassy Lodge, Ojibway-aking Marina and English River Fishing Adventures. The Grassy Narrows First Nation corporation itself employed its own members.

Other sources of jobs included the administration office, a day care center, an education authority, a logging business, two stores, the district heating business, a family service organization, as well as a crisis center. The 3 largest employers employed 114 full time and 89 part time workers.

Other activities did not do very well. Commercial fishing, wild rice harvesting, and berry picking are examples that did not provide much employment.

In 2000, the Grassy Narrows First Nation had 1,107 registered members. In the 1996 the census, or population count, shows that 46% had less than Gr.9, 32% with Gr.9-13. In short, First Nations members needed an opportunity to increase their level of education to make them more employable.

Of the 1,107 inhabitants, the same census shows 270 aboriginals over 15 years of age. Of that number, 185 people were included in the total aboriginal labor force. 105 were employed. Indian and Northern Affairs reveal an unemployment rate of 43%. This appears to be an improvement over the 1988 First Nations report showing 87% as unemployed. In short, employment opportunities were not abundant.

Various financial settlements with the Wabaseemoong Independent Nations came out of the agreements with the parties involved in the dispute. In addition to the money turned over to the to the First Nations corporation, promises included the construction of a high school as well as other community facilities.

The economic development initiatives agreed upon included ones similar to those of Grassy Narrows First Nation. Some were different, for example greenhouse and seedling production, a commercial fishery, logging, to name a few.

As of March 2000, the Wabaseemoong Independent Nations had 1594 registered members. The 1996 census showed that 39% of those over 15 years of age had less than Gr.9. 56% had grade 9-13. There were few members with an education above Gr.13. The unemployment rate was 40%. The unemployment rate since 1978 was considerably reduced. It was 80% in that year.

Mercury Status of Fish

The study reports on mercury levels and other contaminants in fish at various selected sites in the province, including those affecting the two First Nations in question. The levels are still above the Health Canada guidelines of 0.5 parts per million for safe consumption, e.g. northern pike. Others, such as whitefish, are safe for the human diet. Health Canada suggests that populations that consume fish on a regular basis should consider the safer guideline of 0.2 parts per million. It is important that people should refer to the Ontario guidelines for the consumption of mercury contaminated freshwater fish.

Unfortunately, science cannot yet say how long the poisonous mercury will last in affected waters, but it could be several decades. Almost forty years have gone by since mercury poisoning was first discovered in the area studied in the Cosway Report. This toxin remains a serious health threat.

The Report-A Valuable Study Tool

The full report can be a very valuable source of information for students of all ages.

Industrial pollution was not as huge a factor in 1970 as it is now. Science and social study classes could focus on them as study projects.

Social study classes could research the changes in occupations over the last century. This would include traditional life styles, the effects of government policies that affected residents and the attempts to adjust to social change. The aboriginal history of the region could be explored. Comparisons of the effects of industrial pollution in this region to experiences of inhabitants in other areas, such as James Bay, or the effects of uranium mining on the Great Bear Lake Dene Indians.

Social studies classes could study the legislative system at the First Nations Council level, as well as at the provincial and federal levels. A special project could study how a community can apply pressure on government to do something special for its community or region. This is known at times as lobbying.

Councils could benefit by observing the experiences of their leaders in their efforts in the 1970s, '80s and '90s to obtain compensation.

New staff members in health centers, hospitals, Ontario Provincial Police detachments as well as other community agencies should be made aware of the effects of mercury poisoning. It explains many of the mental, physical and social problems people of all ages experience.

It could be an undertaking of the Mercury Disability Board to make available copies of both the short version and the full report to schools, libraries and other agencies in the communities.

conclusions

“Of concern is that the Mercury Disability Board does not have access to data gathered by Health Canada on levels of methylmercury in hair and blood samples of inhabitants tested in both communities. The data is not shared. It is well established in various studies that child development problems occur in many children in both communities. This is evident in learning and behavioral problems. Studies should be conducted to determine the reality and extent of these problems.”

Conclusions

Little new information on a definition of methylmercury poisoning contamination has shown up in studies on the subject.

Of concern is that the Mercury Disability Board does not have access to data gathered by Health Canada on levels of methylmercury in hair and blood samples of inhabitants tested in both communities. The data is not shared.

It is well established in various studies that child development problems occur in many children in both communities. This is evident in learning and behavioral problems. Studies should be conducted to determine the reality and extent of these problems.

There are other issues with regard to the study of data contained in clinical assessment forms. Important information on various aspects of the after-effects of contamination could become evident.

Postscript

The Mercury Disability Board office provided updates on numbers of applications for compensation as well as those receiving benefits. Since the publication of the Cosway Report on April 8, 2001, and up to March 31, 2006, the following statistics update information on compensation claimants:

226 new adult applications
34 new child applications
185 adult appeals
3 child appeals
As at February 28, 2006 there are 158 adults receiving benefits, and 14 children receiving benefits.

The Grassy Narrows & Islington Band Mercury Disability Board: A Historical Report 1986-2001, A Condensed Version
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