

Safe drinking water standards for First Nations communities

The federal government is implementing safe drinking water standards for First Nations communities, 76 of which have boil water advisories in place, Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice has announced.

The new national standards are the first to govern the quality of drinking water on First Nations communities. Ottawa will also work with 21 of the communities with the most serious water issues to develop remedial plans, Prentice told a news conference on Mar. 21. (For a list of communities with advisories in place, go to www.cmaj.ca/cgi/content/full/174/9/1248/DC1.) But Prentice did not allocate any new money for his plan, saying lack of training, maintenance and standards is the issue, not lack of funds.

"It is unacceptable that many First Nations communities across Canada continue to face ongoing risk to the safety of their drinking water," Prentice said. "Like most other Canadians, I was appalled by last year's crisis on Kasechewan First Nation."

Last year, about 1000 members of Kasechewan, a fly-in reserve in Northern Ontario, were evacuated after Dr. Murray Trussler and band officials sounded the alarm about the dangers posed by the community's water quality. The community had been under a boil water advisory since 1996. High levels of chlorine that were used to combat *Escherichia coli* were exacerbating scabies, impetigo and other skin disorders, as well as concerns about hepatitis A and gastroenteritis.

"As long as I am Minister, I will take the preventive measures needed to head off similar crises, and will not hesitate to intervene when the health and safety of a community is at risk," Prentice said.

The 21 communities deemed most at risk are in New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia.

In one of them, the Muskrat Dam First Nation, residents have been under a boil water advisory for more than a year, Band Councillor Charlie Beardy told *CMAJ*. The backwash pumps on the band's water treatment plant gave

out and have not been repaired, Beardy says. Residents have to boil their water or buy bottled supplies.

"I don't see any government people coming up to work on our plant to get it repaired," says Beardy, whose remote Northern Ontario reserve is a fly-in community in summer, accessible by road only in winter.

Although First Nations receive federal funds to build, operate and maintain water treatment systems, until all operators are certified the federal government will hire private companies to deliver water services temporarily in some communities.

Under the new federal plan, operators at all First Nations plants will receive training and be certified to operate the plants.

Under last November's \$5-billion deal between the former Liberal government and First Nations, the government had promised \$400 million in new money for water treatment issues. But Prime Minister Stephen Harper has not agreed to honour the so-called Kelowna agreement, although Prentice has said the government is supportive of its "targets and objectives."

In a news release, Phil Fontaine, the Assembly of First Nations' national chief, called the announcement "an encouraging first step in our larger efforts to close the gap in the quality of life between First Nations and non-Aboriginal Canadians." —Laura Eggertson, *CMAJ*

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News @ a glance

China and AIDS: China has issued its first official regulations on preventing and controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS, including free testing and medication for the nation's poor. The law, which took effect Mar. 1, protects people with HIV/AIDS from discrimination and criminalizes intentionally spreading the disease. UNAIDS estimates that up to 10 million people in China could be infected by 2010. In January, the Chinese government estimated that 650 000 people were living with HIV, including 75 000 with AIDS.



TB campaign: Two Nobel Peace Laureates and several global health care organizations are calling on governments to train more health care workers and finance and intensify efforts to fight tuberculosis (TB) in the 22 countries with the largest number of new TB cases. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa and Betty Williams, who co-founded the Community of Peace People in Northern Ireland, are working with Eli Lilly & Company and 6 global health and relief organizations to highlight the human resources crisis in TB treatment. A well-trained health care workforce is needed if countries afflicted with high rates of TB are to fully implement control strategies, the World Medical Association says in a news release announcing the campaign. According to the Stop TB Partnership, a strategy that commits US \$250 million each year could save 14 million more lives over the next 10 years. TB causes 9 million new cases and 2 million deaths each year. "I urge the G8, governments of TB-burdened countries, and international donors to address this gap in funding for human resources urgently," says Tutu, who had TB as a child.

No junk: Canadian schools are implementing health and nutrition policies to fight the rising incidence of obesity among children. Ontario and Alberta have made daily physical activity mandatory in the curriculum this year. New Brunswick and British Columbia have introduced guidelines to remove foods from schools that have minimum nutritional value and encourage healthier food choices. In Nova Scotia, a policy is under discussion that would remove all unhealthy choices from vending machines and cafeterias. And some schools in Quebec and Saskatchewan have banned soft drink