

Island village hit by suspected swine flu

November 7 2009, By RACHEL D'ORO , Associated Press Writer



This October 2002 picture provided by Dr. David Head of the Norton Sound Health Corporation shows the village of Diomedede on Little Diomedede Island in extreme western Alaska. So many of the 130 residents of the isolated community have been stricken with flu-like symptoms that the Alaska Army National Guard stepped in with a Black Hawk helicopter to transport a medical team there from Nome 135 miles away. The medics arrived Thursday, Nov. 5, 2009 to administer doses of swine flu vaccine and deliver enough medicine to treat every resident if necessary. (AP Photo/Norton Sound Health Corporation, David Head)

(AP) -- Suspected swine flu is sweeping a traditional Eskimo whaling village on a remote Alaska island - prompting an urgent medical mission to deliver help.

"Diomedede is probably the most isolated place in the United States right now," said David Head, a doctor involved in the effort. "We thought it would be better to go out there and just vaccinate people."

So many of the 130 residents of Diomedede have been stricken with flu-like symptoms that the Alaska Army National Guard stepped in with a Black Hawk helicopter to transport a medical team from Nome 135 miles away, where Head is chief of staff at Norton Sound Health Corp.

Diomedede, located less than three miles from Russia's Big Diomedede Island in the Bering Strait, is all the more isolated because passenger air service was halted four months ago when the sole helicopter used for that purpose was sidelined for repairs.

"There's no way people can get out of here," said 73-year-old Patrick Omiak Sr., the village tribal council president. "For emergencies, I'm real glad about the National Guard." A different helicopter still delivers mail and goods, but for liability reasons cannot carry passengers.

He was among the many in the village to get the flu vaccinations that were delivered by a doctor and public health nurse who arrived Thursday from Nome. The medical team also brought enough medicine such Tamiflu to treat every resident if necessary.

Omiak has not gotten sick but said many in community are fighting symptoms including runny noses and bad coughs.

"Some kind of a virus is going around on this little island," he said.

The illness is just the latest hardship for the residents of the rocky island, which covers only two square miles of treeless terrain.

Most residents, whose homes have no running water, are Ingalikmiut Eskimos who depend on subsistence foods, hunting bowhead whale, walrus and seal along with fish and crab.

Medics aren't saying how many in the village have taken ill, but they

note it's a significant enough portion of the population to warrant the emergency response. Three sick people, including a small child, also have been flown out of the village for treatment. At least one person has tested positive for [swine flu](#) in a preliminary analysis.

The Guard will continue to help with emergencies until the regular helicopter service is restored, said Jeremy Zidek, a spokesman for the Alaska Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

Randy Ruaro, deputy chief of staff for Gov. Sean Parnell, said state police and the coast guard are also ready to help until the repairs are completed, hopefully by December. Meanwhile, he said a plan to use the single-engine chopper to transport patients is under discussion.

"I think everyone is working to try and reach the best solution," he said.

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