

Chiefs demand Ottawa account for high TB rates

Jen Skerritt , [Winnipeg Free Press](#)

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The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs is demanding federal health officials show what they are doing to contain the spread of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis in First Nations communities.

Grand Chief Ron Evans said AMC has petitioned Canada's Auditor General to investigate what First Nations and Inuit Health Branch is doing to control rising infection rates on reserves and educate First Nations about disease prevention.

According to Manitoba Health disease statistics, First Nations communities -- particularly northern ones -- are battling rising rates of MRSA, an antibiotic-resistant skin infections, sexually transmitted infections such as chlamydia and gonorrhoea, and TB.

Between January and April 2008, the latest available data, 58 per cent of the province's TB cases occurred in a federal health jurisdiction -- which includes First Nations reserves and Stony Mountain Institution.

Close to one-third of the province's MRSA cases were also reported on federal reserves and Stony Mountain.

More than 450 people contracted chlamydia and sexually transmitted infections were disproportionately high in the Burntwood health region.

First Nations and Inuit Health Branch is responsible for providing health-care services on reserves, including preventing chronic and contagious diseases.

A department spokesman said no one was available to respond to media.

"We feel they are not doing enough because if they were, these numbers wouldn't continue to rise," Evans said.

"That's why we're calling for an audit. We need to find out exactly what they're doing."

Evans said poor housing conditions, lack of access to health care services and limited knowledge of health prevention has helped diseases like TB resurface. He said the federal government needs to take action to tackle the root causes associated with the rise in disease, noting that the problems will continue to get worse down the road.

Recently, he said York Factory First Nation -- a community located north of Thompson -- battled a TB outbreak.

"It's really a challenge because they're underfunded to begin with," Evans said. "As the health problems increase, so does the cost associated with dealing with those problems."

Last year, federal disease control specialists said prevention and control programs haven't reduced TB rates in aboriginals in the past decade. Manitoba has one of the highest TB rates in the country because of its large First Nations population.

Public health officials have also recently expressed concern that Manitoba has disproportionately high number of aboriginal HIV cases.

While Manitoba Health disease statistics don't show the number of HIV infections on reserve or in federal prisons, a report released in February revealed the province has one of the highest per capita HIV rates in the country.

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