FACT SHEET

Mercury Poisoning of the Grassy Narrows and White Dog Communities

Dr. Harada’s Key Findings

The Grassy Narrows community has fought against the neglect of their Treaty rights, the forced removal of their children to residential schools, hydro damming, the relocation of their community, and the destruction of traditional hunting and trapping ground by industry giants. Now a newly translated Japanese study published in 2011 reveals that the disturbing health impacts of mercury poisoning on the health of Grassy Narrows people are still rampant fifty years after the contamination of their river began.

Point of Contamination:

Between 1962 and 1970 Dryden Chemicals Inc. part of the local paper mill, dumped 20,000 pounds of mercury into the Wabigoon River, with the Province’s permission. [p. 56, Hutchison]

On April 6, 1970 the Canadian government shut down the local fishing industry. Within a year unemployment rates in Grassy Narrows skyrocketed from 5% to 95%. [Shkilnyk 1985: 199-202]

Health Canada’s Response:

Health Canada conducted studies on the Residents of Grassy Narrows and White Dog to assess risk for mercury contamination over a 15 year period. By the 1990’s 0% of patients examined were deemed at risk due to the levels of mercury in their system. At this time Health Canada issued a statement declaring that poisoning due to methyl mercury contamination in these communities was a “minimal risk.”

Dr. Harada’s Research:

Dr. Harada, a world renowned mercury poisoning specialist from Japan has studied the effects of mercury contamination on the two communities for over 35 years. In 1975 mercury levels in Dr. Harada’s blood samples from the residents of Grassy Narrows averaged 46.37 ppb, the highest being 159 ppb. It was even higher in Whitedog, averaging 77.39 ppb (parts per billion) and the highest being 385 ppb. The Health Canada safety guideline is 50ppb. [Harada et al, 2005]

Quick Fact:

When mercury contaminated fish is consumed by humans, it is absorbed into the blood stream and attacks the central nervous system.
Dr. Harada’s Return in 2010

All of Dr. Harada’s Grassy Narrows patients who indicated mercury levels higher than the safety guideline of 50 ppm in 1975 were deceased by 2004. [Harada et al., 2005]

Dr. Harada and his team tested 160 people in total. The report found that 59% of all people examined in 2010, had been affected by mercury. [Harada et al., 2011, 3.2]

Of those people aged 21-41 tested, 44% were affected by mercury poisoning, though none of them were alive when active dumping was active. [Harada et al., 2011, 3.3.4]

“According to our findings, there should be no doubt that the sensory impairment is a result of methylmercury contamination. “ [Harada et Al, 2011, 2.2.3]

Other Findings:

In total, 74% of people impacted by mercury were NOT receiving any form of compensation. [Harada et al., 2011, 3.3.4]

Dr. Harada noted a marked rise in psychiatric symptoms, including depression, anxiety and self-injury. He explains: “It was characteristic of this round of investigation to see these eminent psychiatric symptoms. This was probably influenced in part by the prolonged course of incidence resolution and [frustration brought by] the lack of new acknowledgement [from the Canadian government].” [Harada et al., 2011, 3.3.3]

Resources:


Hutchinson, G. Grassy Narrows. 1977. Toronto