

June 5, 1975

MEMORANDUM TO THE MINISTERNotes for statement on testing for mercury inYellowknife area:

During the survey on arsenic levels in hair samples of residents of the Yellowknife area that was carried out in February, 1975, tests for mercury were also done on 20% of the hair samples. These tests were done because a study done by researchers of the University of Iowa some years ago had indicated the possibility of mercury contamination also occurring as a result of the processing of gold ore at Yellowknife. The study of arsenic levels provided an opportunity to obtain up-to-date information on the possibility of a mercury problem, since the presence of mercury in human hair is a good indication of whether, and to what extent, it is present in the body.

All the hair samples tested for mercury revealed levels of less than 10 parts per million (ppm) with one exception, which was 25 ppm. Since the presently accepted maximum safety level for mercury is 60 ppm, it was concluded that further follow-up studies on mercury levels were not necessary at this time. This conclusion was the one I made known in my press release of May 27.



Since that time officials of the National Indian Brotherhood have contacted my officials to inform them of the results of a survey carried out for them on arsenic and mercury levels in some hair samples of residents of two native communities very near Yellowknife. As reported to my officials, this survey was of 18 hair samples, but levels of mercury were reported on only two of the samples. Both of these samples are reported to have revealed significantly elevated levels of mercury.

When told of these results, my officials immediately requested the National Indian Brotherhood to provide them with the full report on the survey, because they wished to follow up with further tests on any individuals found by the NIB to have significant arsenic or mercury hair levels. We have not yet received the report from NIB, and are therefore not yet able to draw any conclusions about the two mercury levels reported, or on the methodology used in the tests.

In the meantime, however, the results reported by NIB have already been reported to the Northern Health Services with the instructions that they are to contact the individuals concerned and ask them to have clinical examinations during Phase II of the Yellowknife survey which will start on June 9.

Whether still further tests or surveys should be conducted at this time in connection with mercury is something that will be assessed when my Department has had an opportunity to study the full report of the NIB survey and these clinical examinations have been done. The fact remains that the much larger survey carried out by my Department did not reveal any mercury levels of significance, and the two high levels reported



from the NIB survey must be examined in that light. Despite this fact I want to assure the Honourable Member and the House that in addition to the immediate steps I have described, my Department will follow up with whatever further work we find to be necessary to monitor the health of the residents of the area and to enable us to take measures to protect it.