



CANADA

MINISTER OF NATIONAL HEALTH AND WELFARE
AND
MINISTER RESPONSIBLE FOR THE STATUS OF WOMEN

MINISTRE DE LA
SANTÉ NATIONALE ET DU BIEN-ÊTRE SOCIAL
ET
MINISTRE CHARGÉ DE LA SITUATION DE LA FEMME

January 20, 1977

Editor
Globe and Mail
444 Front Street West
Toronto, Ontario

Dear Sir:

I would like to comment upon your January 19 editorial "Ottawa Hides the Poison", an editorial dealing with the problem of possible arsenic pollution in Yellowknife. The issue is one which has been of concern to and acted upon by my department for some time now and I hope that nothing I say in this letter will be misread as evidence that I take the problem lightly; it is my intention to get to the bottom of this issue as quickly as possible and to take any steps necessary to rectify any problem which may exist.

But - and this point bears considerable emphasis - the people of Yellowknife will not be helped by the kind of misinformation which was perpetuated in your editorial.

Let me try to establish a few of the facts a bit more clearly than you have done.

First, what constitutes the National Indian Brotherhood, United Steelworkers and "University of Toronto" report? All that I have been able to get after three days of digging is a two page press release from the University of Toronto; a narrative from the National Indian Brotherhood which does not give figures in any systematic and usable fashion and from Dr. Jervis a "report" consisting of three sheets of paper listing a series of figures. If there is more I hope that the originators will see fit to make it public - should they not, the Globe and Mail might next consider turning its critical eye towards them.

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There are many other points to raise as well.

1. The NIB-Jervis sample size was 66 (46 Indian children and 20 industrial workers). My own Medical Services Branch study utilized a sample of 700 (155 industrial workers and the rest from the general population). Since arsenic is a cumulative poison, our study made every effort to get long-term residents and mine workers in the sample. Because the issue is one of very critical concern to people who live in Yellowknife we also offered examination to any member of the public who wished to be tested.
2. In our study, 57% of the industrial workers tested had levels of arsenic in excess of 5 ppm (17.5% of the total sample had such levels) and 36% of the workers had levels over 10 ppm. If we transpose these results to the NIB - Jervis sample with its 20 industrial workers, our hair sample readings do not differ greatly from Dr. Jervis'.
3. However, hair samples are, at best, a very rough indicator of arsenic levels in the body. Of the 63 individuals with hair sample readings in excess of 10 ppm, 50 volunteered for and were given detailed clinical and laboratory examinations. Only five were found to have even slightly elevated levels of body arsenic as shown by 24 hour urine samples. These people had readings in the range of 0.1 to 0.3 mg. of arsenic per 24 hours. It is a widely held scientific opinion that urine levels of 0.7 to 1.0 mg. do not represent an undue hazard for workers who work in places like the mine and mill in Yellowknife.

The NIB - Jervis study seems to have taken no urine samples so it is difficult to assess their results.

All of our figures were released to the public in news releases dated May 27, 1975 and October 3, 1975. Is that government secrecy? Or did your staff not bother to look?
4. There are no hidden reports. The "previously unavailable YES report" was scheduled for release on January 17, 1977, the date on which the NIB released their report. The Chairman of the YES Committee decided to delay release until the NIB report could be assessed. As for the other reports, the results were either released as press releases or, in the case of the two documents provided to the YES Committee, have been provided to the press. The Gemmill report to the YES Committee which is being quoted by NIB as the YES Report was released by the Department of Environment in late August 1976 and extensively discussed

in the interested press (for example the Edmonton Journal) at the time. The Grainge Report, also utilized by the YES Committee, was released by the Chairman of the Committee in August, 1976.

5. Arsenic levels in the snow in Yellowknife have been a persistent concern to us. Since 1949, individuals resident in the Yellowknife area have been warned intermittently not to use snow as a source of drinking water and water is supplied to all residents from a safe source either by pipe or by truck delivery.
6. Arsenic levels in the vegetation are equally a source of concern. High levels of arsenic are known to exist in the soil, that, of course, would be expected after 30 years of industrial emission. However, significant levels of arsenic are found only on the leaves of green vegetables and they can be rendered safe for eating by the normal process of washing. It is important too in this context to note that the Gemmill Report assigns a level of 10 ppm to all root vegetables. That report points out that this was the lowest value measurable by the technique which was used. It is, at best, unscientific to quote these figures as the minimum levels - the real minimum levels may easily have been zero.
7. The wide discrepancies in quoted emission figures from the Giant Yellowknife smoke stack are of concern to me. I, frankly, cannot completely account for them. I certainly hope that the independent commission I have announced will set the record straight on this score.
8. The quote from an internal government memorandum on the subject of in-plant hygiene to the effect that "It would be advisable not to release this memo to the public as it may cause undue concern" should be set in context. It was an advisory opinion from a junior official of the Department of Environment. That hardly constitutes government policy. Moreover the information was made available to the Territorial government who were, of course, free to act on it as they thought appropriate.
9. It has been difficult to obtain the cooperation of the National Indian Brotherhood in dealing with the discrepancies between their findings and those of other studies. For example, the president of the NIB, Mr. Noel Starblanket, has told my officials that he will not consider passing on to my department the names of the Indian children who were tested at Yellowknife so that we may contact them and, if their parents wish it, provide them with complete clinical

and laboratory tests to establish if there is a need to treat them or take preventative action on their behalf. There may be some reason for this refusal but if there is, Mr. Starblanket should make it known.

Moreover the NIB's contention that it will not cooperate with the independent task force being established to study the issue unless they are allowed to name members seems quite inappropriate. The NIB has made its views known and has obvious concern in this matter. So has the government. In recognition of that I have asked the Canadian Public Health Association to name the Committee completely on its own and I would hope that NIB would recognize the impartiality thereby assured and not seek to delay the study any longer than necessary by refusing to cooperate.

In conclusion let me re-iterate my concern over this issue. The best available evidence to date suggests that there is not a significant health hazard to Yellowknife residents as a result of arsenic pollution. However, in an attempt to resolve any doubt which may remain, I have established an independent task force selected by the Canadian Public Health Association. I will give it all possible assistance and it will, of course, be completely free to report all its findings to the public. I trust that it will receive equal cooperation from the NIB, the United Steelworkers and Dr. Jervis. I hope too that when it does report, the Globe and Mail will trouble to find out all the pertinent facts before it editorializes further on the issue.

Marc Lalonde

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M. Lalonde

Health and Welfare Canada
Departmental Correspondence and
Parliamentary Returns Division

Santé et Bien-être social Canada
Division du courrier ministériel
et des rapports parlementaires

PRESS CLIPPINGS - COUPURES DE PRESSE

NAME OF PUBLICATION NOM DE PUBLICATION

OTTAWA CITIZEN

25-1-77

Arsenic scrutiny *

Editor, Citizen: In an editorial Jan. 19 you commented on the serious problem of possible arsenic pollution in Yellowknife and asserted that the government has failed to make its findings public.

This is completely untrue.

There are, in fact, three government reports. The most important is likely to be one prepared by the Yellowknife Environmental Survey Committee (YES). It was chaired by a senior official of the territorial government and its report was to have been made public on Jan. 17.

It seems more than coincidence that the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) chose to make its report available on that date.

I have not seen the YES report. I will see it at the same time as it is made public by the territorial government. I hope that will be soon, but the timing is not up to the federal government.

The YES committee requested that two senior federal researchers — one from Environment, the other from Health and Welfare — examine all available data on arsenic in Yellowknife and report back to the committee.

The officials were unable to agree on an interpretation of the data and wrote separate reports. Both reports were made public in the late summer of last year and were widely commented on in Alberta and the North.

Since "arsenic in Yellowknife" was not yet a media event in Eastern Canada, your paper and the rest of the Eastern press seem to have missed seeing those reports or even noting their public existence.

A similar lack of interest seems to have greeted press releases and accompanying reports which I issued on May 27, 1975 and Oct. 3, 1975 spelling out fully the results of our research up to each of those dates.

I think, too, that you and your readers should be clear about what constitutes the NIB-Jervis report. After six days of digging, all that I or my officials have been able to obtain is a two-page press release from the University of Toronto, a narrative from the NIB written in an accusatory but non-factual way, and, from Dr. Jervis of the University of Toronto, a "report" consisting of three sheets of paper listing a few figures.

The problem of arsenic levels in Yellowknife may be serious. The bulk of research conducted by my department suggests that it is not, but I recognize that some doubts persist.

That is why I have asked a completely neutral body, the Canadian Public Health Association, to name a three-person task-force to examine all data.

Marc Lalonde
Minister of Health
House of Commons



CANADA

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Dr. Whately

MINISTER OF NATIONAL HEALTH AND WELFARE
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MINISTRE DE LA
SANTÉ NATIONALE ET DU BIEN-ÊTRE SOCIAL
ET
MINISTRE CHARGÉ DE LA SITUATION DE LA FEMME

January 21, 1977

Editor
The Citizen
1101 Baxter Street
Ottawa, Ontario

Dear Sir:

In an editorial of January 19 you commented upon the serious problem of possible arsenic pollution in Yellowknife and asserted that the government has failed to make its findings public. Your assertion of government secrecy is completely untrue - something which your editorial writers could easily have established had they taken the least trouble to check their facts before they editorialized.

There are, in fact, three government reports. The most important of these is likely to be one prepared by the Yellowknife Environmental Survey Committee and popularly referred to as the YES report. The committee was chaired by a senior official of the Territorial government and its report was to have been made public on January 17. It seems more than coincidence that the National Indian Brotherhood chose to make its report available on that date. I have not seen the YES report; I will see it at the same time as it is made public by the Territorial government. I hope that will be soon but the timing is not up to the federal government.

The YES Committee, as part of its investigation, requested that two senior federal researchers, Mr. D. Gemmill of the Department of Environment and Mr. J. Grainge of National Health and Welfare examine all the

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I think, too, that you and your readers should be clear about what constitutes the National Indian Brotherhood - Jervis report which has precipitated the current round of controversy. After six days of digging all that I or my officials have been able to obtain is a two page press release from the University of Toronto, a narrative from the National Indian Brotherhood written in an accusatory but non-factual way and, from Dr. Jervis of the University of Toronto, a "report" consisting of three sheets of paper listing a few figures. There may be more; if there is I hope the originators will see fit to make it public - just as I have made all of our available information public as soon as it was available to me.

The problem of arsenic levels in Yellowknife may be a serious one. The bulk of research conducted by my department suggests that it is not but I recognize that some doubts persist. That is why I have asked a completely neutral body, The Canadian Public Health Association, to name a three person task-force to examine all the data available. The task-force will receive the full co-operation of my department and it will make public its conclusions as soon as they are reached. I hope that the task-force will receive the equally full cooperation of the National Indian Brotherhood, the United Steelworkers

and Dr. Jervis of the University of Toronto. I hope too that it will receive the attention of your editorial writers lest they again wrongfully accuse the government of secrecy.

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