

Ojibway Indians victims of pollution

by Karin Junkerman

(PNS) — One hundred and fifty miles north of the United States border in Ontario Province, the people of two Ojibway Indian reservations are falling victim to a crippling disease with a strange-sounding name.

The disease is called Minamata, after the Japanese fishing community where it first occurred.

Minamata is caused by organic mercury deposited in local waters by petrochemical plants flushing out their waste products. On the Grassy Narrows and White Dog reservations of the Ojibway, as in Minamata, the mercury has contaminated the fish that is a staple of the local diet.

The disease progressively dissolves the nervous system, leaving its victims deformed and crippled for life. The first symptoms are a tingling numbness in the lips and limbs. Then movements become hard to control, words slur together in speech and the victim's visual range narrows. Hearing and sight deteriorate. In the advanced stages, victims fall into uncontrollable motions and sometimes begin shouting involuntarily. Death may soon follow.

Autopsies have shown the brain transformed into a kind of sponge as its cells are eaten away. And mercury-poisoned infants have been born to apparently healthy mothers.

Despite a major court decision recognizing many victims' claims for compensation 10 years after the first cases were identified, the disease still afflicts Minamata: Medical authorities estimate that over 10,000 of its residents may now be suffering from it. Seven hundred people there have been verified as seriously diseased; 103 have died.

For the Ojibway Indians of Canada — and perhaps for other parts of the world polluted by mercury — the problem is just beginning.

MERCURY WASTES

Like Minamata, the Grassy Narrows and White Dog reservations are located on water. In Minamata, a large petrochemical company called Chisso Corp. polluted the local bay with mercury, which it used in the manufacture of ac-

etaldehyde, a component of plastics, drugs and perfumes.

Grassy Narrows and White Dog are situated in a lake region where land and water areas form a complicated network of byways called the Wabigoon-English system.

The Dryden Paper Co., Ltd., a subsidiary of the British Reed Paper Int., owns a pulp mill that discharges mercury-laden wastes into the Wabigoon-English. The mill sits upstream from the reservations.

Although only light Minamata symptoms have been found so far among the Ojibway, indications are numerous that the Indians are about to develop the full-fledged disease.

Settling in the mud of riverbeds, mercury waste is absorbed by fish, and some Wabigoon-English fish have shown mercury levels correlating exactly to those of fish in Minamata. Ojibway who eat this fish have had their hair examined for mercury, revealing levels the same as those found in recognized Japanese victims of the disease.

And cats gone mad with Minamata disease have appeared in the area — as they did in the Japanese community before human symptoms were identified.

OFFICIAL INACTION
Unlike Minamata, where in 1973 the Japanese courts awarded 138 victims \$3.6 million in damages from the Chisso Corp. after a prolonged legal battle, the Ojib-

way have received no official help.

The Canadian government announced in 1970 that the Ojibway did not have Minamata disease. Yet the government simultaneously banned the catching and eating of fish in the region of the reservations because of mercury poisoning.

Before the ban, the region had been popular among tourists and sportsmen. Many of the Ojibway had been employed as guides and elsewhere in the tourist industry. But after the ban tourism dropped off — and with it the Ojibway lost a major source of income. Many have had to turn to welfare.

Those Ojibway who have ignored the ban on catching and eating local fish run a big official risk. A victim by a deliberation board that — according to a spokesman for Seirinsha, a Minamata support group — includes doctors who previously had refused to recognize an outbreak of the disease elsewhere. "Incorporating these doctors onto the committee was a political decision," the spokesman says. "The risk even greater than their economic hardship: Minamata disease."

MINAMATA'S LEGACY

In Minamata, the Chisso Corp. accepted the court's decision to award damages to victims and agreed to compensate other victims who had not gone to court.

But three years after the court ruling, it is increasingly difficult for victims there to get help. A claimant must first

spokesman charges, "aimed at checking the number of recognized victims and fostering a nationwide attitude that the disease is over."

The Chisso plant is still operating — with the help of a government loan — and the sea is still being polluted with mercury. A large net fastened to the bottom of the sea marks a safe fishing area, but a channel has been left open into the inner bay for boats. Fish pass through to the poisoned waters of the inner bay, take in mercury, swim back out and are caught for human consumption. "Sediment in the area still contains mercury compounds," says the Seirinsha spokesman, "and official opinion to the contrary, the danger of contracting Minamata disease still exists."

In the past year, Minamata and Ojibway delegations have exchanged visits in an effort to increase their understanding of the disease. Says Jun Ui, one of Japan's leading experts on pollution and spokesman for the Japanese delegation, "the problems of pollution in Japan portend the destiny of the whole world."

Ui believes the Ojibway can prevent their reservations from becoming another Minamata only by a determined effort to force the Canadian government to halt the Dryden mill's pollution.

If they cannot, the Ojibway people can only wait to see if cats gone mad are augurs of a perilous future.

Slave requests back pay

A masterpiece of acrimonious writing, a letter from a freed slave to his former master, is recounted in the August issue of "American Heritage." The magazine states that the letter from George Anderson to Colonel P. H. Anderson was apparently dictated to the V. Winter mentioned therein, who sent it to the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in London.

In his letter of August 1865, the former slave wrote that he was glad to find the Colonel wanted him to come back "promising to do better for me than anybody

else can," and expressed surprise that the Colonel had not been hung for harboring rebels, or for killing a Union soldier. "Although you shot at me twice before I left you I did not want to hear of your being hurt . . ." he said.

"I am doing tolerably well here. I get 25 dollars a month, with victuals and clothing, have a comfortable home for Mandy (the folks here call her Mrs. Anderson), the children . . . go to school. We are kindly treated. Now, if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be

to my advantage to move back again."

" . . . We have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you," the double-edged letter continues. "I served you faithfully for 32 years and Mandy 20 years. At 25 dollars a month for me, and 2 dollars a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to 11,680 dollars. Add to this the interest for the time our wages has been kept back, and deduct what you paid for our clothing . . . Please send the money by Adams' Express, in care of V. Winters, Esq., Dayton, Ohio."

Study commission ponders government changes

The Tri-County Local Government Commission, a blue ribbon committee which is studying the effectiveness of local government, approved a motion at its July 15th meeting to adopt conceptual short and long range reorganization alternatives. The commission took the first step toward developing a reorganization proposal to obtain public input.

The Commission is in the process of setting up meetings in the community to find out what type of government the people want.

Short range and long range and long range proposals will be discussed.

Short Range

The Commission suggests a Tri-County Council that would serve as the major policy-making body for the matters that are now the responsibility of the Columbia Region Association of Governments (CRAG) and the Metropolitan Service District (MSD). Its members would be directly elected by and accountable to the voters of the Tri-County area. Members of CRAG and MSD are appointed.

The short range alternative would be a major step toward achieving a more feasible and accountable governing mechanism for providing those services required on a Tri-County basis and for providing the coordination needed to make the various parts of the governmental system work more harmoniously. There would be three general programs under the direction of the Tri-County Council: planning, physical and human services, and support services.

The planning function would absorb the services now provided by CRAG.

Physical and human services would include those functions currently authorized for MSD and any new functions or aspects of functions that the Commission may recommend to be authorized such as water supply and major cultural or recreational facilities. Support services would provide those services desired by lower tier governments (counties, cities, special districts) on a contractual basis.

The relationship of the Port of Portland and Tri-Met to the Tri-County Council has not yet been clearly determined. Options include leaving them as they are now or incorporating them within the Tri-County Council much the same as MSD and CRAG.

Another alternative might be similar to that of the Sewer Board and Transit Board to the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council. That is, the Tri-County Council might appoint the members of their governing boards and would have general policy and certain limited budgetary control over them. They would basically perform their functions as they do now. Currently Port and Tri-Met members are appointed by the Governor.

Cities, Counties and service districts would not be affected by this proposal, although larger cities and counties would be encouraged to develop smaller area councils to advise them.

Long Range

The long range alternative proposes a simplified two-tier government for the metropolitan area.

Matters of significance to the metropolitan area would be assigned to the upper tier, while those services and re-

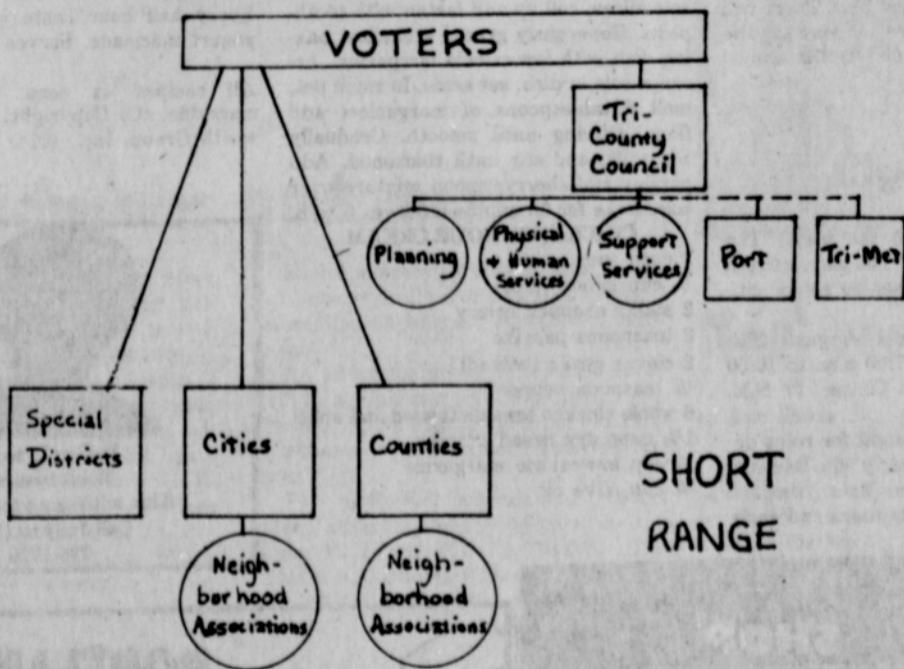
sponsibilities considered to be local would be assigned to the lower tier cities of community districts.

At both levels, policy controls would rest with governing bodies composed of directly elected officials. General purpose government would have the preference over single purpose government.

Key Questions

1. In order to achieve a more simple government, should our regional functions be integrated and coordinated by combining two or more of the regional governments into a Tri-County Council?
2. Should members of a Tri-County Council be elected? If elected, should members be elected at-large or from single member districts?
3. How many members should there be and what should their terms of office and compensation be?
4. Should the presiding officer of the Council be elected to that position by the voters or the members of the Council?
5. What functions and responsibilities should a Council exercise?
6. Should a Tri-County Council have planning, budgetary and appointive control over those regional governments and functions not integrated directly within it?
7. How should a Tri-County Council and regional functions for which it is responsible be financed?

Organizations that would like to discuss these issues with the Commission, should contact Bill Cross, Public Information Coordinator, 1912 S. W. Sixth Avenue, 229-3576.



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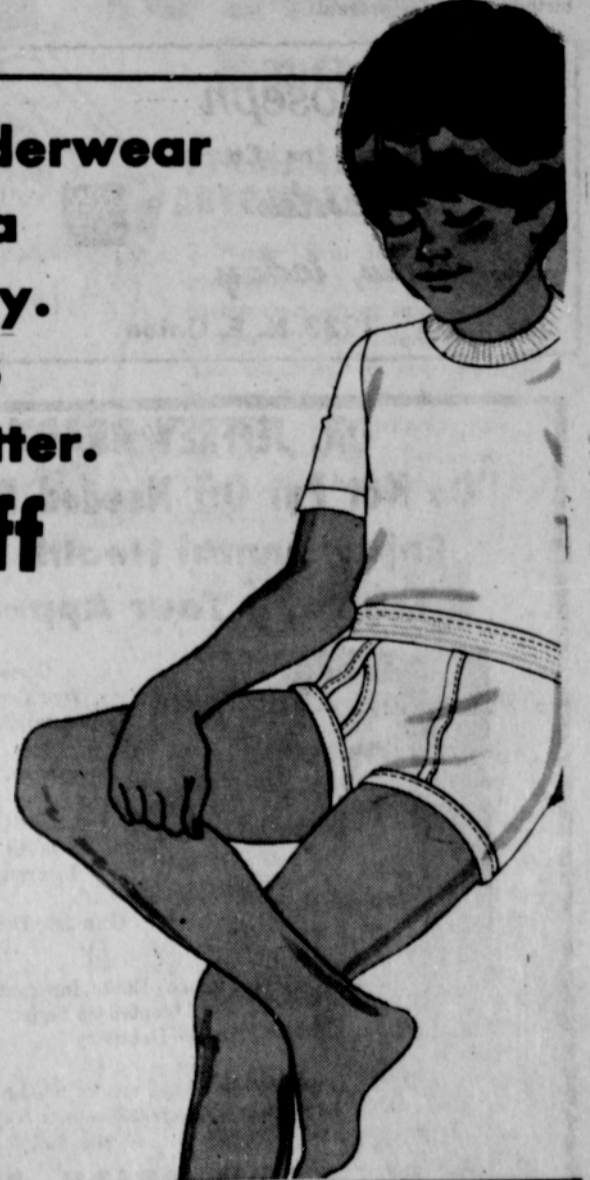
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Correction

The article on X-pansions credited to Pat Lasley in the July 29th issue of the Observer was written by Gregory Gudge.