

EKATI LAUNCHES SCREENING PROGRAM TO LIMIT DEVELOPMENT OF TB IN THE LOCAL INUIT POPULATION



Tuberculosis (TB), along with malaria and HIV/AIDS, is one of the major infectious diseases that has a wide-ranging impact on mortality and morbidity. Globally, TB is the leading cause of death associated with infectious diseases. The incidence of TB is expected to increase substantially worldwide during the next ten years because of the interaction between the TB and HIV epidemics. In the Northwest Territories of Canada, TB is a significant issue among the Inuit population, which as a consequence has an impact on our EKATI Diamond Mine operation. In an effort to limit development of the disease, we have embarked on a screening program to detect latent TB infection in our workforce and the local community.

The following statistics demonstrate the tragic impact of TB.

- TB is the leading killer of women, outranking all causes of maternal mortality.
- TB creates more orphans than any other infectious disease.
- TB is the leading cause of death among HIV-positive individuals.
- As many as eight million people become infected with TB every year.
- Someone is newly infected with TB every second of the day.
- One third of the world's population is infected with TB, and 5 to 10 per cent of these people will develop the disease.
- TB accounts for more than one quarter of all preventable adult deaths in the developing world.

Screening program implementation

The initiative at EKATI is an attempt to limit the development of the disease in our employees and their dependants and in the local Inuit population generally. The screening program, which is aimed at detecting latent TB infection, will begin in the workforce and then be taken into the community.

By detecting the infection in a person before it becomes active, it is possible that a course of treatment will reduce the chances of active TB developing and infection occurring to others.

This will have the benefit over time of reducing the incidence of TB in the community.

The screening program has the potential to set a precedent for the management of high levels of TB within communities. It may also be applicable in communities where TB/HIV co-infection occurs and where active TB is the first sign of deteriorating HIV status. The early treatment of latent TB in this group would be a significant factor in preserving good health in patients while they are in an immuno-compromised state.

In the past, screening for latent TB has been difficult, as there have not been tests available that offer a clear indication of those who are infected as distinct from those who have been vaccinated against the disease. The availability of a new test that is able to separate these two categories of individuals, and thus allow potential treatment of those who are truly infected, has made this program possible.

The screening program at EKATI is being set up in collaboration with Canadian Public Health authorities and will be overseen by local specialists in TB. We will be the first company to sponsor such a program involving this new form of testing to assist in the eradication of TB from a community.