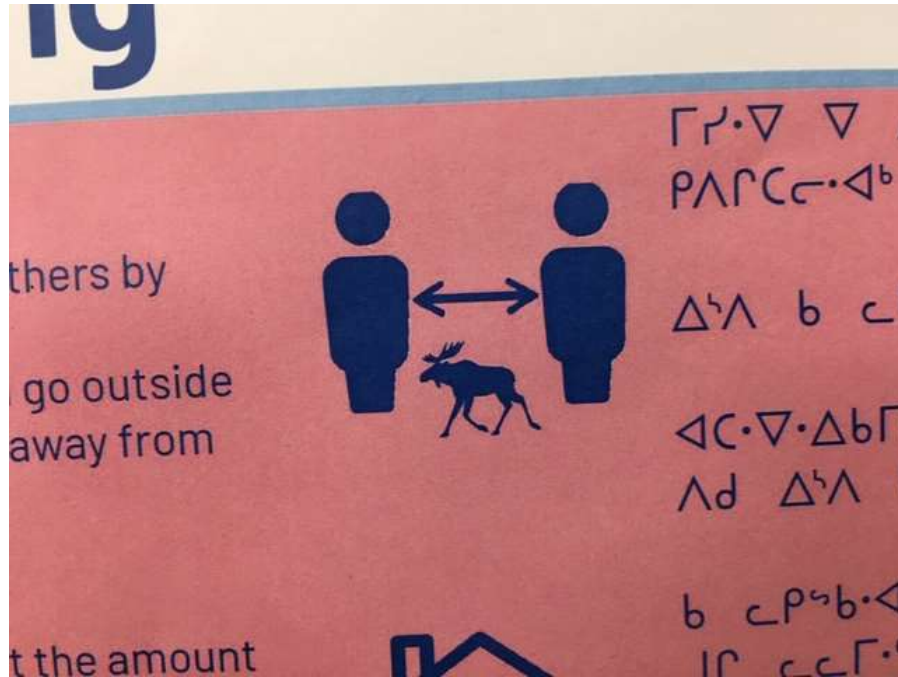


## “Operation Remote Immunity”

Or

*How being part of a rural immunization program is forging new learnings and friendships.*



### **Social distancing regulations in the Cree community**

Dr. Jane Cox is a member of the Church of the Ascension in Sudbury, a member of the National Church's Public Witness for Social and Ecological Justice Committee, and a retired family physician. Recently she and her husband Gary Bota applied and were chosen with 78 others to participate in Operation Remote Immunity whose task it was, under ORNGE Paramedic leadership, to immunize residents in the Kashechewan and Attawapiskat communities along the James Bay coast against Covid-19.

Sarah Herst is a first year medical student at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine (Thunder Bay site). Sarah is in the middle of her two week experience immunizing residents in the Wapekeka Reserve, flying daily to this community from Thunder Bay. This week she is vaccinating in the community of Mishkeegogamang.

While the primary purpose of their trip was vaccinations, both Dr. Cox and Sarah encountered so much more in their travels including true northern hospitality and new learnings about the communities and people they visited. One of the hosts for Dr. Cox's team was the Rev. Canon Norm Wesley from the Diocese of Moosonee.



**Sarah Herst at Wakepeka airport**

Here is Dr. Cox's first hand account of the experience:

"We were asked for 1 week of effort. After a week, we would jump at the chance to participate again. We felt honoured and blessed to participate in this program.

Pre-deployment, we were required to take an extensive Indigenous cultural/safety online training course. (Excellent). We also needed to watch short videos about plane safety. Our small King Air 100 planes are workhorses last built in 1972. Our young pilots were competent, funny and adaptive. When I commented to one of the pilots that he might consider a hat and gloves in the -40 degree weather, he announced loudly that "I've been trying to get away from my mother in Halifax for years!"

Our 'team' consisted of a team leader paramedic, a team doctor with ORNGE, 2 medical students, 1 nurse, my ER husband and myself-a retired family doctor. Our actual team also included Canon Norm Wesley - an Anglican minister and gem living in Moosonee, administrative Indigenous youth, community Rangers, local paramedics, local nursing and midwifery staff, a nursing station administrator and 2 computer data entry staff. Now that I am back in Sudbury, I think it was a 'dream team'. We had daily debriefs trouble shooting and much collaboration. Not once. Not once was there an ill word said about the Indigenous residents or their communities.

During the course of our week, we could see first hand, the impact of colonization on our Indigenous neighbours and on their health care. I recommended to the medical students that they read the recommendations from the Truth & Reconciliation Commission and think about the impact climate change will have on food security with hunting/fishing, housing, health and community.

There was vaccine hesitancy. Relationships with outside organizations and authorities can be strained with concerns of safety. The leadership of the Chief and Council members were important in supporting the vaccination program. Canon Norm was a stellar individual showing leadership, kindness and humour. He treated us to Snow Goose sandwiches-130 geese are left in his freezer! During a lull in a vaccination day, Canon Norm invited me and a medical student to see the T.B. Station. Thinking this was an historic site with learning potential for me, we hopped in a truck and arrived at the T.V. station! In Cree, Norm translated my words and invited residents to attend the Covid vaccination clinic. The Church of the Ascension in Sudbury has had several educational/cultural events with our Indigenous neighbours. I tried to incorporate these teachings into my first ever Cree T.V appearance!

There are real barriers to health care in First Nations communities. Funding fluctuates without much warning affecting vital programs. Due to Covid, there has been no doctor locum in either Kash or Attawapiskat for over a year. Regular spring flooding affects homes and causes community evacuation. With no drinking water, a case of the stuff is \$36 per case at the Northern Store. We decided to bring in fresh fruit and water with our daily flights from Timmins. It is remarkable that our Indigenous neighbours are able to be so strong with what they have to work with. They are spiritual peoples.

It became clear, at this late date, that I am not cut out to be a military type person. Our very competent ORNGE team lead requested all folks come to the clinic sites for immunization. I did house calls which were inefficient but appreciated. Our team lead requested speed once the vaccine was gently defrosted. I continued on at a slow, conversational pace with lots of laughs with those being vaccinated and stickers of fake gems/love hearts.

Operation Remote Immunity was a spiritual journey for me.  
( by Dr Jane E. Cox)



**Getting ready to vaccinate at the Community Centre in Wakepeka**



**One of the lovely gifts the immunization team received from community members**

About the experience Sarah writes:

Week One of Operation Remote Immunity has been filled with learning, friendships and laughter. Over the last four days our team met bright and early at 7am, loaded into a plane even I couldn't stand up inside and flew the hour and a half to Wapekeka.

I was gifted with a team lead who recognized the importance of culture and collaboration. I was encouraged to sit and talk with community members, listen to their stories, and soak in every cultural experience and interaction I could. We visited the nursing station, participated in home visits, and even celebrated the birthday of one of the rangers. As a first year medical student, the very first vaccine I ever administered was the COVID -19 vaccine in Wakepeka, and that is something I will always remember.

As we were told on our last day before take off, there is no word in the Ojibwe language for "goodbye", there is only 'until we meet again'. Until we meet again Wakepeka, thank you for everything you have shown and taught me.

(By Sarah Herst)

Article submitted by Archbishop Anne with a lot of help from Jane and Sarah.