

How do you SAY pancreas in Cree?

Photo on left: Coastal Dialect Team (L-R) Elsie House, Ruth Salt and Frances Visitor
Photo on right: Northern Dialect Team (L-R) Elders Elsie and Harry Duff, CHR Emily Sam and Professor Margaurite Mackenzie.

photos courtesy of George Diamond

School board and linguists collaborate to Cree-ate new words

By Steve Bonspiel

Have you ever wondered how to say liver or pancreas in Cree? How about insulin? Those new terms will be in circulation within the next short while thanks to a program sponsored by the Cree Health Board.

The resolution to invent new words was passed by the CHB with the recommendation and help of Dr. Faisca Richer of Public Health. They worked closely with the Cree School Board's Cree language staff, linguists and medical professionals, to come up with 50 new Cree words, created in Val d'Or February 24-25.

"I think it's going to give confidence to people who go to the hospital," said George Diamond, Program Officer for Healthy and Safe communities with the Cree Health Board. "The translators will be able to translate better what their ailment would be. The elders will be able to understand what it is because of the translation.

"We concentrated on diabetes because that's the most prevailing disease that we have in the Cree Nation," Diamond added. "We wanted to translate words or come up with new words associated with diabetes."

Diamond's job, and that of Public Health nurse Louise Pedneault, was to tell people the meaning of the word or find out the medical terms and in what

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context the word was used.

Pedneault added, "My role was to explain the medical words like pancreas, insulin and the glands so they can describe it in Cree."

Community Health Representative Emily Sam said the process was informative and a barrel of laughs.

"The elders had some of these words already and we didn't know," she chuckled. "We had a hard time on the pancreas, we had to give them a drawing or show them where it is exactly. When I first started they gave me two words for it. I kept showing them pictures and finally we figured it out. We had a lot of fun at the workshop, it's very important to preserve our language."

Diamond hopes that in the future, words associated with other entities in

the community are translated as well. The problem right now, he says, is lack of funding.

"If Cree entities want to enhance the language in the work place I think there should be a place where they can get funding," he said. "I don't know from which organization they would [get funding], but I think the Cree culture and language is very, very important to many people in the Cree Nation."

This was the first time people sat down and came up with new words, he noted. "We're trying to enrich and enhance our Cree language and culture."

Diamond said that the creation of new words was made possible though the flexibility and dedication of the Cree Programs personnel.

"This was a special case, working with the Cree language people. They had a meeting and we sort of piggy backed on them and added two days so we could do this terminology workshop," he said.

The team worked closely with Marie Odile Junker, a linguist at Carleton University. "We tried mixing up the dialects, as well as to try with small groups and big groups," she said. "The community health representatives were essential in explaining the words and helping to come up with new ones."

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Southern Dialect Team (L-R) Iren Otter, Louise Blacksmith, Mary Rabbitskin, Anna Blacksmith, Linda Petawabano (back to camera) Daisy Moar

She also credited the elders, who were essential in the process. Their invaluable input ensured that everything ran smoothly.

"It's one thing to develop words but it's quite another for them to be adopted by the people who speak," Junker stressed. "So the next phase is

to do a mix of education and community outreach. We'll see what kind of feedback we're going to have."

Junker explained to *the Nation* that there are three ways to create new words. The first is borrowing from another language and incorporating it into Cree. Much the same way that French speakers in Quebec say "tires" with a French accent when they could just as easily say *pneus*.

The second way is to give a new meaning to an existing word. Junker cited as an example the word *iskuteu*, which means fire and also takes on the meaning of battery and sparkplug. The third way is to create a new word using the rules of the language.

Junker has been working on www.eastcree.org, a website dedicated to the Cree language. Because of this,

new words such as "browse" and "mouse" have already been incorporated into the Cree language.

"I think it's very important if you want a language to survive that the language be able to move into describing new realities," she said. "Every language has in itself the power to create new words."

The words that were created are going to be discussed on the radio and are also available in the terminology forum on www.eastcree.org.

"The new words are not being forced on anyone, they are up for discussion and don't appear in the official Cree dictionary," said Junker. "Right now they are on the web so people can make suggestions and comments. Only time will tell if people end up using them."