

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Provision of Maternal Health Services in Nunavik, Quebec



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Background

Methods

Key Findings

- Nunavik is the northern most region of Quebec and is inhabited predominantly by Inuit people
- Inuit people experience significantly higher rates of perinatal morbidity and mortality compared to the rest of Canada or other rural or northern populations¹
- Beginning in the late 1960s, women in Nunavik, Quebec were flown to Moose Factory, Ontario four weeks prior to their due date to await delivery alone
- The Inuulitisivik Midwifery Service was created in 1986 as a result of community mobilisation in Puvirnituuq, Nunavik and has expanded to two other communities on the Hudson coast of Nunavik
- Many women with low-risk pregnancies now receive the majority of their prenatal care locally and deliver at a local 'maternity' under the care of midwives
- However, air travel is still essential to women's access to maternal health care within Nunavik and for transfer to Montreal
- On April 3rd, all non-essential flights in and out of Nunavik and between communities were cancelled due to COVID-19. Those travelling for medical appointments were required to quarantine for two weeks on their return

*"There has been a change for the better [since the start of the midwifery service]. There's **less trauma, less violence**, and there's more bonding with the children because the father can come and watch the woman give birth. Giving birth in the community strengthens the relationship and changes the family dynamic."*
– Kimberly Moorhouse, Midwife

*"There was a time were **nobody left and nobody came**. The nurses and doctors had to stay longer than they were supposed to because there were no people to replace them."*
– Kimberly Moorhouse, Midwife

*"Isolating for two weeks upon their return is pretty difficult for mothers to accept, especially if they have a new little baby with them. There were many missed ultrasound appointments, we had two births attended by nurses in smaller communities. **The women were afraid**. They just did not want to leave."*
– Djenane Gaspard, Inuulitisivik Professional Service Coordinator



A new mother in the maternity in Inukjuak, Nunavik.

Photo by Patrice Latka

- Semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted with physicians, midwives, and health care administrators working in health centres in Nunavik
- Funded by the Pulitzer Centre on Crisis Reporting Fellowship, a 2,000 word reporting piece was drafted to explore the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the provision of maternal healthcare in Nunavik
- This story is being pitched to newspapers for publication this fall

- Since its inception, the Inuulitisivik Midwifery Service has empowered the community and begun a healing process for the families and communities impacted by the evacuation policy
- In view of the restrictions and the risk of introducing COVID-19 into Nunavik, many doctors, nurses and midwives cancelled their placements in Nunavik
- Fear of the virus, as well as the mandatory quarantine, deterred women from flying to receive perinatal care
- In response, the Inukjuak maternity opened its doors to care for women who refused to fly to Puvirnituuq or Montreal for prenatal appointments and delivery
- The Inuit midwives hope to ensure the stability and longevity of the program by expanding the midwifery service to additional communities and training more local midwives

1. Luo, Z. C., Senécal, S., Simonet, F., Guimond, É., Penney, C., & Wilkins, R. (2010). Birth outcomes in the Inuit-inhabited areas of Canada. *Cmaj*, 182(3), 235-242.