

OTTAWA, ONTARIO--( Sept. 17, 2009) - Health Canada apologizes for the error that was made in the number of body bags that were ordered for the Wasagamack First Nations. We regret the alarm that this incident has caused.

The Department is working with First Nations in the development of Pandemic Plans for their communities. In addition, our Nursing Stations are actively involved to ensure adequate provisions are in place.

The Department would like to provide some context to the concerns raised about pandemic preparedness in First Nations communities.

Health Canada delivers services in remote areas through Nursing Stations. We routinely stock commonly required medical materials such as personal protective equipment, pharmaceuticals and other medical supplies such as body bags.

These stocks are replenished on an as-needed basis. A location's stock size is determined by several factors, including total population, utilization and geographic location. Another important consideration is that some of these communities are unreachable by road, water or air during the winter months. In other words, we wouldn't be able to bring these supplies into some of these communities, should they become necessary.

It is unfortunate that this has been linked exclusively with H1N1. Whether it's a nursing station in a remote First Nations community in northern Manitoba, or a hospital in downtown Vancouver, supplies are constantly being re-stocked to prepare for unknown and unforeseen events, whether it be a plane crash, environmental disaster or pandemic.

Given the unknown severity of a potential outbreak, and the existing vulnerabilities of northern isolated communities, Manitoba region recently completed a re-stock of supplies for the upcoming three to four month period in a number of First Nations Communities in which we provide primary health care services. The number of bags sent to this community clearly does not correlate with the current scientific evidence that PHAC has provided with respect to the severity of illness that we expect to see in the fall.

Again, Health Canada apologises. We all regret the alarm caused by the stocking of this particular item. It is important to remember that our nurses are focussed entirely on providing primary health care services under often-trying circumstances. We value the excellent work they perform.