When the Water Changed: How one family doctor is speaking out about the tar sands industry

by Jan Malek

Dr. John O’Connor comes across as a mild, jovial man. He speaks fondly of his home on the South Shore of Nova Scotia and chuckles softly when “boasting” about his banjo and harmonica-playing skills. His lilting Irish brogue gives his voice a pleasant, soothing quality, which must come in handy when he speaks to his patients about matters concerning their health.

In the early 90s when the Alberta government began putting restrictions on foreign graduates, Dr. O’Connor and his family decided to expand their opportunities. The family moved to Fort McMurray, and Dr. O’Connor set up a practice in the burgeoning town. Home to many First Nations families as well as migrant workers – many of them working in the rapidly expanding oil operations – Fort McMurray was where the O’Connors found a new way of life.

“It was my first experience with First Nations and Aboriginal culture. I really found that I enjoyed the people and learning about their traditions,” recalls Dr. O’Connor.

Soon after that he was invited to practise in Janvier, southeast of Fort McMurray, followed by Fort McKay, just north of the city, and then, in 2000, in Fort Chipewyan, the most remote of the Aboriginal communities outlying Fort McMurray. Both John and his wife Charlene, who is a nurse whom he fondly refers to as “the other half of the tag-team,” continue to actively practise in the area.

Nestled in the banks of the Athabasca, Fort Chipewyan is home to just over 1,000 people. It is accessible by river (the Athabasca) and plane, and by winter road during two months of the year. It is a community that has deep ancestral roots – families have been hunting, fishing and gathering their own food there for generations. Fort Chip, as it is known, is the oldest settlement in Alberta. It is also directly downstream from the world’s largest and most environmentally toxic industrial project: the tar sands.

As Dr. O’Connor spent more time there he says he got to know the people. His relationships with his patients grew stronger as he cared for their health, and in turn, he says, they trusted him. To this day he considers himself “part of an extended family” in the Fort Chip community.

It didn’t take long before Dr. O’Connor was hearing about water and environmental changes from his patients, and their particular concerns regarding their health, especially related to cancer.
“I was the only Doc in the area and the very first thing that struck me was how people talked about the changes in their environment, especially the older people,” recalls Dr. O’Connor. “They all had the same story – they all said the same things: that they noticed the changes in the water, the fish and the wildlife. They compared it to years before. There had been a drastic change and most people were asking, how did this happen?

“The story they all relayed was that the water had changed. It tasted bad; it wasn’t clear like it was in years gone by. There was a film on top with rainbow colours like oil. The fish that people were pulling from the water had missing pieces, or extra pieces, lesions and bumps and these red spots like they bled under the skin, and the fish didn’t taste good. A lot of people said the fish tasted like diesel or oil, and the same with the ducks. The population of ducks had dropped and what they hunted for, or were able to trap, didn’t taste good,” he recounts.

Their concerns regarding cancer – for which they have no word in either Cree or Dene – were especially troubling. Fort Chip is a very traditional community. Eighty per cent of the people who live there subsist on traditional foods and live off the land. Their growing concern was that the land, the water and the animals were now changing.

CONCERNING QUESTIONS
As his patients talked about these changes, Dr. O’Connor also began to notice patterns in their health.

“The medical records at the Nursing Station were well kept – and they told stories of cancer, diagnosed well before my arrival. Many had passed away, and others were in varying stages of treatment or remission. There were also many with chronic illnesses, such as auto-immune illnesses like lupus and rheumatoid arthritis, and hypertension, diabetes, renal failure – overall, a lot of pathology, and it seemed disproportionate to the small size of the population.”

WHAT TO DO?
Dr. O’Connor says he began speaking with other medical professionals. His practice in Fort McMurray continued to serve about 9,000 patients. “I really wasn’t seeing anything proportional to what I was seeing in Fort Chip,” he says.

“It’s not always clear to a family physician – when you are in a community and you are seeing a plethora of illness and pathology that’s not just cancer, but other illnesses. Initially it’s curiosity and then it’s your antenna going up, and then you start wondering what agency you should be talking to, especially when you are in an Aboriginal community. The jurisdictional responsibilities are divided between on reserve, which is federal, and Health Canada, and then off reserve, which is provincial, and Alberta Health. As I’ve learned now, the federal and provincial people don’t always seem to know where their responsibilities begin and end. But illness knows no boundaries.”

Then came a call from a CBC reporter who had heard about Dr. O’Connor’s concerns. The resulting media coverage would set off a national and international media frenzy, raising questions about the possible connection between the unusually high number of health concerns and the community’s close proximity to the tar sands.

“The question you ask in a setting like this, when you’ve got an inordinate amount of illness in such an isolated and small community – where is it coming from? Could it be a lifestyle issue, or perhaps genetics at play? Maybe it is just bad luck? Or maybe it could be related to environmental changes? Of course, the environment and cancer are intimately linked, everywhere – we know that,” says Dr. O’Connor.

The national media attention also provoked both the provincial and federal governments. Dr. O’Connor soon found his practice and his efforts as a doctor called into question in a very public way. In 2007 Health Canada and Alberta Health laid complaints with the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta against Dr. O’Connor ranging from irregular billing practices to “inciting undue alarm.” All charges have since been withdrawn, but the questioning of his actions and his ethics still weighs heavily on him.

STUDying THE ISSUE
Over the past several years numerous studies have been done by scientists and experts, which have been countered by both provincial and federal governments. Independent analysis of the water, land and surrounding environment has confirmed significant levels of toxins. In 2010, a research paper titled Do the Oil Sands Pollute? concluded that yes, absolutely, they do. Using government sources, the report stated there are approximately 5-10 million litres of contaminated water seeping from the tar sands’ toxic tailings ponds every day, and the largest tailings pond leaks 67 toxic litres a second, and has been doing so for decades.

In the past few months provincial and federal panels set up to look into the issue have concluded that there has been no credible scientific government monitoring of the environment ever, contrary to the decades of claims of “world class monitoring and regulation” of the tar sands industry.

As the reports and studies go back and forth, Dr. O’Connor has his own view.

“I have no doubt in my mind that there is a strong connection between the illnesses downstream, and the tar sands industry. The onus right now should be on the government to disprove that link.”

While the stress resulting from the charges laid by Health Canada and the threat of losing his medical licence took its toll, Dr. O’Connor asked a colleague to take over the medical practice in Fort Chipewyan. He still goes back occasionally, and continues to consult with patients there. He also continues to speak out.

Dr. O’Connor has joined a growing group advocating for the community to take control of monitoring the water and the environment. He is also an active member of the Council of Canadians’ Board of Directors, sharing his passion and knowledge with our organization.

He believes the provincial and federal governments have shown a “disgraceful disregard” of the health and welfare of people living downstream from the tar sands. “The industry isn’t going to go away, but it does need to be replaced. It underlines that we need to transition away from fossil fuels. We need to take control and make sure that the future is in the hands of the people and that energy resources are green,” he says.

When asked if he considers himself a whistle-blower, Dr. O’Connor pauses for a moment, considering his words before replying.

“I’m not a whistle-blower at all. I was just doing my job. I was advocating for my patients. Advocacy is implicit in being a doctor – you have to be your patients’ voice.”

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