

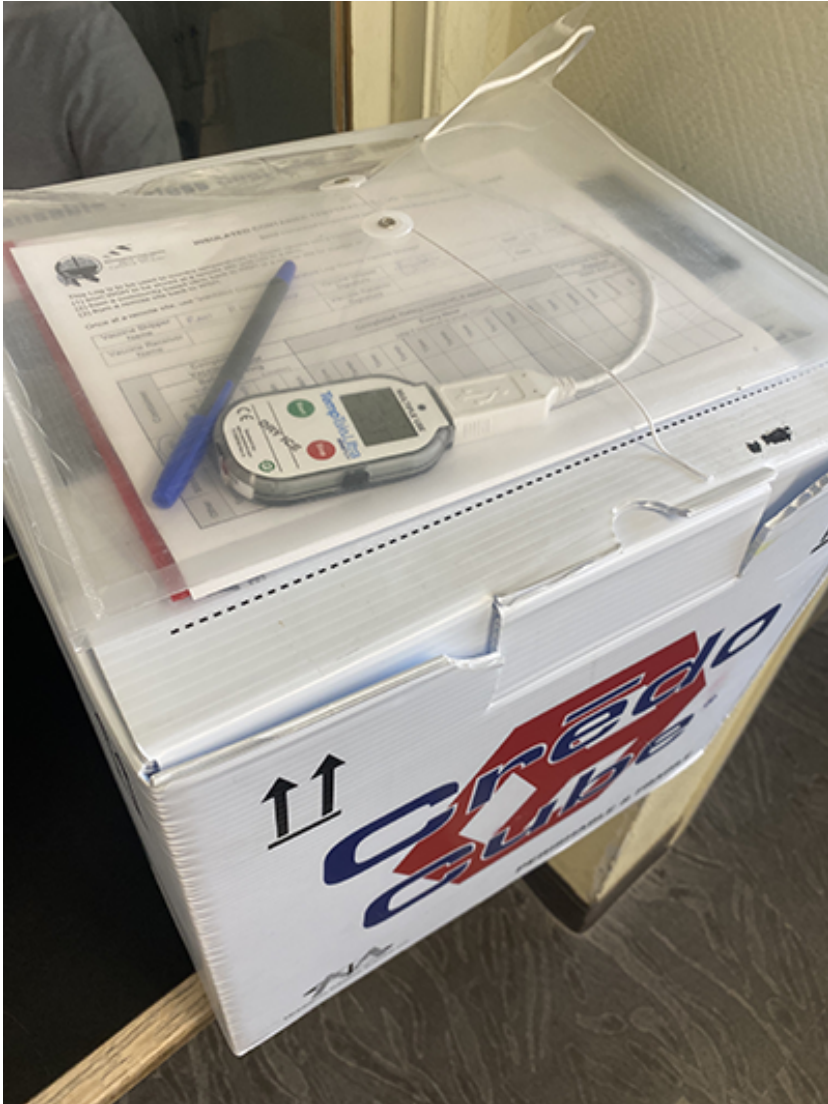
Attawapiskat, a year, and the space in between

by David Ponka MD CM CCFP FCFP MSc

The James Bay coast is where I consolidated my clinical skills, over 20 years ago. But it is the friendships that stay with me. That, and the lessons learned: the importance of community, of humility. And humour.

I decided to come back last year to help during a particularly bad wave of the pandemic. I thought I would see a lot of bad cases, so I reviewed my ABCs. But my most useful contribution may have been to transport vaccines up to coast to Attawapiskat, in a simple but sturdy container. I recorded temperatures every hour. I hope the vaccines worked.





The James Bay Coast-the Weeneebeg

Vaccine transport



The Attawapiskat Nursing Station-a half a day charter flight from Kingston

A year later, there are still cases in Attawapiskat-150 miles up the coast from Moose Factory, a coast that is fluid with rivers etched into it, a bit like a vascular bed, draining its contents back into some grand reservoir, gushing forward with determination if not hope-but fewer than last year. I think the vaccines worked.

The suffering here is perennially palpable. If we think we are in crisis in mainstream Canada, this would be laughable here, in a constant state of being and survival. Milk has increased by 50 cents for a litre and a half. Not as bad a gas, but gas is not as essential either.









Prices for essentials-in 2021 and 2022

Empty shelves at the local store

Water is expensive too. Double the price of gas. Funny, on a coast perennially etched and transformed by water-the Bay has always seemed sooo circular to me, maybe the result of an ancient asteroid impact, forever defining the landscape-but what do I know.

At least there are no boil advisories (here) (at present).





Continuity of care-2021 and 2022

And this year I brought my wife. Correction: the community was gracious enough to invite my wife. This may be an important step. As a curator of European art at the National Gallery of Canada, she has been looking for a way to contribute to reconciliation.



The path ahead does not look easy and the onus is clearly on us-people of mainstream Canada-to listen, and give back, and learn. If there is a recurrent lesson here, up the coast, it is this: everything is connected. I try to remember this, especially at this unique time of human history. There is a tendency to look inwards at this time, at our parochial realities, wanting to protect our immediate communities. But the pandemic has other plans: if we do not forge partnerships-globally, nationally, hell, within our own province-we may not see the end of this.







A field is reclaiming where a church once stood

The muskeg, looking out towards the Bay