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Inuit in Canada's eastern Arctic speak out about skin grafts done without consent in 1970s

👤 [Kieran Oudshoorn, CBC News](#)

📅 Posted: Tuesday, May 14, 2019 at 10:24 — Last Updated: Tuesday, May 14, 2019 at 15:56

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Three Inuit show scars from skin graft procedures they say were done by researchers in the 1960s and 1970s. The photos were taken about a month ago; CBC News has agreed not to identify the people pictured. (Submitted by Steven Cooper)

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"We are not animals, we are another human being that deserves respect."

— Paul Quassa

He described another instance where he had been out hunting one February, wearing caribou clothing. When he got back, researchers made him stand outside for 20 minutes before letting him inside. Quassa suspects they were testing his ability to withstand the cold.

Quassa says he never gave his consent to be experimented on; he says Inuit were very compliant and trusting back then, and they did what they were told.

'It was really unfair'

The [International Biological Program](#) was a large-scale multi-year project aimed at co-ordinating research among scientists worldwide. It looked at everything from pest control to pollution and how people adapted to their environments.

A [1970 article on the program published in Science](#) said studies on "Eskimos, South American Indians, migrants and populations living at high altitude ... include not only the health of these populations but also social conditions, nutritional patterns [and] biological rhythms."

"I was grafted with part of the skin of my sister."

— Lazarie Uttak

It's estimated that researchers did the skin grafting experiment on more than 30 Inuit from Igloolik, including Lazarie Uttak.

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happening and the reason why they did it. I never found out.”



Quassa points to a scar left by a skin graft performed on him. (Kieran Oudshoorn/CBC)

2005 book outlines tests

The experiments in Igloolik are outlined in the 2005 book *Beyond the Hippocratic Oath: A Memoir on the Rise of Modern Medical Ethics* by Dr. John B. Dossetor, a celebrated Canadian physician who was inducted into the Order of Canada in 1994.

In it, Dossetor describes participating in the large research mission, travelling to Igloolik in 1972 and performing a series of skin grafts on Inuit.

Dossetor and his colleagues were studying why some skin grafts work while others fail, and they wanted to test their theories on an isolated human population.

Dossetor was a professor of medicine at the University of Alberta at the time. He went on to become an expert in medical ethics.

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Igloolik has a population of about 1,600. (CBC)

In his book, Dossetor writes that his research in Igloolik received “community consent,” which he claims was granted by elders via a non-Inuk translator.

The doctor confronts the ethics of his research in the book, ultimately concluding that his team had not done enough to secure meaningful consent, though Quassa and Uttak say he never made any attempts to reach out or apologize to those he experimented on.

Dossetor is in his early 90s, living in Ottawa. He declined an interview request.

Memoir is ‘sickening’

Representatives from the federal Department of Indigenous Services and from Health Canada both declined to comment.

In an email, the director of the University of Alberta’s Research Ethics Office, Susan Babcock, said the university did not have a formal research ethics review process in 1972. It wasn’t until 1978 that the Medical Research Council of Canada put together

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Quassa says the details revealed in Dossetor's memoir are "sickening."

Quassa shot back at the doctor's concept of "community consent." He questions what details were actually shared with locals in Inuktitut, and dismissed the idea that elders could unilaterally grant consent for invasive medical procedures.

"I've heard of scientists doing experiments on monkeys — they use animals to do a lot of experiments for the betterment of humankind," he said.

"We are not monkeys, we are not animals, we are another human being that deserves respect."

Quassa, Uttak and other Igloolik Inuit are considering their legal options. They are working with an Edmonton-based law firm to potentially seek an apology and damages.

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Kieran Oudshoorn, CBC News

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