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## Poor recordkeeping breaks up 4000 families (CAN)

Posted By : **Synercon**

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Mary was cured after six months, but it took two more years for her to be returned to her family because no records were kept of where she came from or who her family was. By the time she made it back to Grise Fiord, she'd spent half of her short life in a sanitarium, couldn't speak her parents' sole language, and didn't even recognize their faces.

"Ignorance and incompetence made my sister a stranger in her own family," her sister Martha says.

Read more: **Vice News, 13 June 2014**

### 1 About the Author

The Synercon Group specialises in the provision of tools and services for best practice information governance. "Our Vision is to simplify the complexity of information governance." Find out more about us @ [www.synercon.co](http://www.synercon.co)

## How Canada's Poor Record-Keeping Broke Up 4,000 Families

By **Emma Paling**

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This article originally appeared on **VICE Canada**.

Mary Flaherty was only two years old when she was taken for tuberculosis treatment in a southern sanitarium. Tuberculosis treatment wasn't available in the Arctic, so she and thousands of others were shipped by the government to sanitariums in Hamilton, Montreal, and other southern cities. Her family was on its way to the High Arctic as part of a government relocation of Inuit families to Grise Fiord, the northernmost inhabited part of Canada, and a community that did not exist until the government created it to prove to Russia that Canada could claim sovereignty in the Arctic during the Cold War. Flaherty was diagnosed with tuberculosis aboard the ship there, and taken from her family. There were no translators who could speak Inuktitut on the ship, so her parents weren't told what was wrong with her, where she was going, or when she'd be back.

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“Ignorance and incompetence made my sister a stranger in her own family,” her sister Martha says in a documentary made about the forced relocations, *Martha of the North*.

Mary was one of over 4,000 people taken from their homes with no explanation to their families. Record keeping was so bad that many Inuit families to this day have no idea what happened to their loved ones, including whether or not they were cured or passed away, and if they did pass away, where their remains are buried.

“At any one point in time in the 1950s, one in seven Inuit were in care in the South. So we’re not talking about a few people,” said Natan Obed, the director of social and cultural development at Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., the organization that protects Inuit land claims in Nunavut.

“Family members had no way of knowing where they were or how long they were going to be in care, and sometimes people just didn’t come back,” Obed said. “There’s this longstanding concern—and rightfully so—about where people’s loved ones are buried and what actually happened to them.”

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These concerns are the focus of a government project, Nanilavut (or ‘let’s find them’ in Inuktitut), to track down the graves of lost loved ones and provide as much information as possible to their families. The hope is to create a searchable database so that family members can call and find out where their loved one was treated and where they, or their grave, ended up. So far, records have been identified for 4,300 individuals, according to an Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada media relations officer. They know 1,340 of these people returned home and at least 830 died away from their communities. It’s unknown what happened to the rest.

“Both the remoteness of the communities and the limited communication media affected the flow of information,” according to Aboriginal Affairs. Another challenge was that most Inuit didn’t use surnames until the 1970s, said Terry Audla, the president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the “national voice of 55,000 Inuit.” So instead, Inuit were issued dog tags to wear with an “E-number.” E was for Eskimo.

Audla said his father lost his first wife this way. “My father, prior to marrying my mom, had a first wife who was sent off to a sanitarium in Timmins. But he didn’t know that’s where she was going and was left behind with three small children. She never came back,” he said. “He never knew what happened until many years later. There were many examples like that.”

The organization Obed works for approached the government for help with this project in 2008, after receiving regular calls from individuals hoping to track down their family members.

“A lot of people came to us, either on behalf of elder Inuit who are dying, or it’s terminally ill Inuit themselves who are calling us and saying: ‘My whole life I just wanted to say goodbye to my brother, or I want to have closure with my mother who passed away,’” Obed said. He received other requests from families who lost small children and have hope that they’re still alive, and maybe were just randomly adopted into other families without their parents’ knowledge or permission.

“These are incredibly moving stories and the requests to us are very simple,” he said.

Obed hopes to provide an active database, proper headstones for Inuit who were buried en masse in unmarked graves in the South, and memorials so that family members can pay their last respects and see that their mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters “can be buried in a dignified way,” he said. He’d also like to see a travel program for Inuit to visit the graves of their family members, because it’s “prohibitively expensive” to travel from the far North to Hamilton or Montreal, or wherever else the sanitariums were.

“We’re looking for closure in a few different ways,” he said. “This isn’t something Inuit did themselves. The government provided care, the government demanded that Inuit go South for care, the government was responsible for all of this initiative. And yes it was to help Inuit overcome tuberculosis, but at the same time there’s basic human rights.”

It’s still hard for some Inuit to trust the intentions of the health care system, Obed said. In 2007 he was part of a national health survey, and many Inuit hesitated to take part because all the tests and surveys were done aboard ships. And at the same time people were being sent South for tuberculosis treatment, Inuit families were being relocated into the High Arctic under false pretenses, there were coerced settlements, the beginning of residential school programs, and dog slaughters to ensure Inuit had less access to the land and their traditional way of life.

“All of these things were happening in a very short period of time, one on top of the other,” Obed said. “The legacy of the tuberculosis treatment and care in the South is mixed in with all these other things.”

“The emotional consequence of that on a society is tremendous,” he said. “This society as a whole was traumatized.”

*Follow Emma Paling on Twitter: @waitwhichemma*

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