

Community grieves death of doctor in plane crash

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The Star Phoenix

A longtime Nipawin doctor who died in a plane crash Saturday is being remembered by his community for his commitment to rural medicine.

Dr. Harvey Christiansen, 73, died when the float plane he was piloting plunged into an unnamed lake near Pelican Narrows about 450 kilometres northeast of Saskatoon. An autopsy has been ordered.

"We're all grieving together," said Dr. Pat Chernesky in an interview Tuesday from the office she shared with Christiansen for more than 20 years until he retired in 1997.

Christiansen and two passengers, a 35-year-old man and his 10-year-old son, both from Saskatoon, were en route from Sandy Bay to Jan Lake where the men owned cabins. They had stopped to refuel at Pelican Narrows. Shortly after takeoff, Christiansen's 50-year-old de Havilland Beaver single-engine float plane crashed into a lake about 11 kilometres southeast of the airport. Pelican Narrows is about 450 kilometres northeast of Saskatoon.

The passengers, whose names have not been released, escaped from the plane after it hit the water and managed to swim 60 metres to the shore.

They spent the night there and were rescued Sunday morning by a pilot sent out to look for them. The man and his son were treated in hospital and are now at home in Saskatoon.

Efforts to reach them were unsuccessful.

On Monday, Christiansen's body was removed from the plane by the RCMP underwater recovery team. He had owned a cabin on Jan Lake since the 1960s.

"He was an excellent pilot. He was a nice fellow to have around. He really enjoyed his privacy and flying gave him the opportunity to have that," said Glen Hoodle, owner of Great North Lodge in Jan Lake.

Christiansen, originally from Saskatoon, was a fresh, young medical school graduate in 1959 when he moved to Nipawin to set up his practice. Nipawin, with a population of slightly more than 5,000, is 270 kilometres northeast of Saskatoon.

"He was a very progressive and innovative man," said Chernesky, who was recruited to Nipawin by Christiansen in 1974. "He just had ideas. His No. 1 thing was his patient -- what's best for the patient. And all through his medical career he was fighting for new and better things for the patient."

It was his commitment to his patients that kept his clinic doors open in 1962 when doctors across the province went on strike to protest the government's plan to introduce publicly-funded health care, according to Chernesky.

"He believed people needed their care."

After the strike, he set up one of the province's first community clinics. Then more than 10 years ago, he arranged for the provincial government to pay him and Chernesky a set fee for their roster of patients rather than the traditional fee-for-service method.

Always wanting to be on the leading edge of medicine, Christiansen introduced treatments and procedures to his patients in Nipawin that weren't available anywhere else in rural Saskatchewan.

"He started the idea of home care in the community. Our area was one of the first in the province to start a home-care program and now home care is everywhere."

Chernesky, a family friend as well as colleague of Christiansen, said he is survived by his wife, five children and several grandchildren.

Investigators with the federal transportation safety board have arrived at the accident scene

and are trying to determine how to raise Christiansen's plane. Most of it is under about six metres of water.

"It's a remote area in the sense that you can't drive to it," said Peter Hildebrand, regional manager with the board, in an interview from Winnipeg.

It could take a week or longer for the aircraft to be retrieved from the lake, he said.

Despite being 50 years old, the aircraft's age wasn't necessarily a factor in the crash, Hildebrand said.

He said investigators are not aware of any radio contact indicating the plane was having difficulties.

Obituary of Dr. Harvey Christiansen.

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