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Leaders

Ontario Dietitians in
Public Health

July 27, 2021

Dr. Kieran Moore,
Chief Medical Officer of Health
21st Floor, 393 University Ave,
Toronto, ON M5G 2M2

Dear Dr. Moore

Re: A Cautious and Measured Reopening

On behalf of the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHa) and its member Medical Officers of Health, Boards of Health and Affiliate organizations, we are writing today to urge a cautious and measured approach to reopening the province as we strive to vaccinate as many Ontarians as possible.

As the leaders of Ontario's local public health system, we extend our thanks to you and the Government of Ontario for leadership that has enabled us all to reduce the impacts of COVID-19. It has been a long road but together we have brought Ontario's daily cases down dramatically since the peak of the third wave and have fully vaccinated nearly 70% of our eligible population. It hasn't been easy, and challenges remain, but we can all be proud of the work Ontarians have done to get to this point.

Continued management of the pandemic and capable leadership will be crucial to enabling a strong and sustainable recovery of society and the economy. As we look to other jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom, Israel, and the Netherlands - countries that are experiencing a surge of cases despite relatively high vaccination rates - it is clear that Ontario remains vulnerable to the more infectious and severe variants that are emerging, especially within our unvaccinated population.

A cautious and measured approach to reopening will still be required as we make every effort to maximize vaccine coverage of the eligible population. With 80% of eligible Ontarians having received at least one dose, we can be confident that this will be the minimum number of fully vaccinated individuals in the very near future. We must remember however that 20% of the Ontario population is still nearly 3 million and includes every individual under the age of 12. We must also acknowledge that even this is very likely well below the threshold for herd immunity for this particular virus, which has been estimated to be as high as 90%.

As we look to the next phase of the response, we strongly recommend that the following approaches be taken to carefully manage the ongoing threat of COVID-19 while regaining the many benefits of an open economy.

1. Maintain Infection Prevention Measures in Public Places and Workplaces

As the province of Ontario moves to open more fully it is important that we maintain certain measures to control transmission, given that we are unlikely to achieve herd immunity in the foreseeable future. We fully recognize and support the importance of a more open economy, noting its measurable influence on many of the determinants of health. However, the experience of other countries has shown that the need for ongoing infection prevention measures will remain at least until we are able to make an evidence-based decision that they are no longer necessary.

- Wearing masks in public indoor and enclosed spaces regardless of vaccination status
- Screening all employees every workday/shift for symptoms of COVID-19
- Maximizing ventilation including by moving operations outdoors where possible
- Retaining capacity limits and other measures that allow for physical distancing within the available space of the business where practicable
- Maintaining a workplace safety plan
- Maintaining paid sick leave to reduce workplace attendance for COVID cases

These measures will allow businesses to resume full operations, while keeping the population safe, and employees healthy enough to work.

2. Continue an All-of-Society Vaccination Effort

Ontario's success vaccinating nearly 70% of its eligible population with two doses in a little more the last 100 days is thanks to a multi-provider effort: public health, hospitals, pharmacies, primary care, and emergency medical services all playing a part.

The province's vaccination taskforce has hinted at potentially narrowing COVID-19 vaccination efforts to just primary care and pharmacies. While this may be reasonable farther into the future, we believe that Ontario and its economy will be best protected if opportunities to get vaccinations are maximized.

As we move to the next phase of the vaccine roll-out, engaging and convincing complacent and hesitant Ontarians to get their shot will succeed only with ongoing efforts from all of these providers. Each has regular contact and trust with different segments of the population. Public health (like many of its community partners such as social service agencies) serves many populations who do not have links to other health care; primary care providers have relationships with families that can be leveraged to convince whole households to get immunized; pharmacies provide many local access points to vaccination in the community; hospitals can immunize any unvaccinated patients who fall into their care. Workplaces, post-secondary learning institutions and community associations can also be leveraged to assist in a variety of ways.

3. Policy Measures to Increase Vaccine Uptake

Public policy plays an essential role in maximizing vaccine coverage, ensuring that the reopening of our society and our economy can get to a sustainable footing sooner. We believe that policy measures that incentivize vaccination should be considered to give complacent or hesitant Ontarians a nudge to seek their vaccine. The approach taken with long term care facilities serves as an excellent example of what can be pursued in other venues such as acute care facilities, home care, primary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities.

Similarly, workplaces should be encouraged to have in place policies that encourage and support the vaccination of their employees. We note that both the OMA and RAO have called for mandatory vaccination of health care workers as a duty of care to their patients. The province has struck an excellent balance with long term care, requiring these facilities to have policies that document the vaccination of staff and encourages them through education to be vaccinated. Such an approach would be helpful to augment vaccination in these other venues, achieving enhanced safety from COVID-19 in other public service and workplace settings.

The development of a vaccination certificate has been proposed by the Ontario COVID-19 Science Table on this topic¹ as an incentive for Ontario's eligible population to become fully vaccinated, and to allow for businesses and services to continue to open more safely during periods of increased transmission. While their report notes a lack of evidence on the impact of such on vaccination coverage or on COVID transmission, the report does cite vaccination certificates as a possible means of enabling businesses, services, and public venues to remain open for in person attendance for those who are vaccinated during higher levels of COVID transmission. It also notes concerns that have been raised regarding equity of access both to vaccinations and for such services with this approach (such as for persons of lower income, members of racial minorities, blue collar shift workers). However, it is likely that the call for this approach will increase with the increase in transmission that is being predicted in the weeks and months to come. As such it would be prudent for the province to consider and further investigate the potential for this approach.

4. Develop policy to ensure the opening and continued operations of in-person schooling

The pandemic has greatly impacted children and youth, with Ontario schools being shut down longer than other jurisdictions in Canada. Policy is critical to ensuring the opening and continued operations of in-person schooling. Schools are not only important for the education and health of students but enable parents and guardians to participate in the workforce. It is beyond the scope here to comment on the comprehensive report by the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table, we would stress that the early months of school re-opening will be a critical time period to maintain preventive measures within schools and the broader community.

As children under 12 cannot yet be vaccinated, schools will be uniquely vulnerable to COVID-19 outbreaks this fall. While illness in children tends to be milder on average, children can transmit to others particularly within households.² We strongly support and thank the government for extending school-focused public health nurses for the coming school year. These dedicated resources to prevent and contain outbreaks are key to ensuring schools continue to operate. They will also play important roles in contributing to the catch-up of vaccinations in Grade 7/8 students, future childhood COVID-19 vaccinations, and supporting school mental health initiatives.

We look forward to reviewing and commenting on the Province's comprehensive plan to get students back to school, learning in person full time when it is released.

5. Maintain Local Resources for Pandemic Control

Local efforts in this pandemic around contact tracing, managing outbreaks, and testing have slowed the spread of COVID-19. As we reopen and rely less on restrictions in society to control COVID-19, we increasingly rely on local contact tracing and outbreak management, as well as immunizations.

As the winter approaches and COVID-19 can spread more easily, we may again see outbreaks in long-term care, congregate settings, and workplaces. Case, contact and outbreak management will be critical to reducing the risk of continued spread. Local resources need to be preserved and possibly augmented for these purposes.

¹ <https://covid19-sciencetable.ca/sciencebrief/covid-19-vaccine-certificates-key-considerations-for-the-ontario-context/>

² <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2031915>

In the last 16 months, public health, even more so than the hospital sector, has had to cancel most routine services, diverting over 80% of our resources to the pandemic response. Like hospitals, which will need years to catch-up on their surgical backlog, public Health will need years to make up lost ground in virtually every program area outlined in the Ontario Public Health Standards. Significant lost opportunities for health, including chronic disease prevention, addictions and mental health, healthy child growth and development, and childhood immunizations, must be recovered.

There is a great need for a commencement of the recovery of local public health programs to address these needs, and to identify priority areas early in the recovery process. Sufficient and stable funding invested in local public health capacity will be essential to keep infections low while we work to vaccinate as many people as possible, continue to contain infectious through the winter season, and allow public health to catch-up on critical services that have been interrupted by the pandemic.

The coming months will present important opportunities for our province, but the risks cannot be ignored. If we succeed in keeping cases low and vaccination rates high, Ontario has the potential to see a sustained return to more normal economic and social life. But the potential for resurgence remains and decisions made in the coming weeks will determine which scenario Ontario experiences. As the front-line of Ontario's public health response to this pandemic, we believe the recommendations in this letter will give us the best chance to seize the opportunities while minimizing the risk.

Our members, as Ontario's front-line and pre-eminent public health experts, are more than willing to provide further advice and input to ensure the success of Ontario's COVID-19 response and recovery and we look forward to an invitation to discuss this with you further. To schedule a meeting, please have your staff contact Loretta Ryan, Executive Director, alPHa, at loretta@alphaweb.org or 416-595-0006 x 222.

Sincerely,



Dr. Paul Roumeliotis,
alPHa President



Dr. Charles Gardner,
Chair, Council of Ontario Medical
Officers of Health (COMOH)



Wess Garrod,
Chair, Boards of Health Section

COPY: Alison Blair, Associate Deputy Minister, Pandemic Response and Recovery

The Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHa) is a not-for-profit organization that provides leadership to the boards of health and public health units in Ontario. alPHa advises and lends expertise to members on the governance, administration and management of health units. The Association also collaborates with governments and other health organizations, advocating for a strong, effective and efficient public health system in the province. Through policy analysis, discussion, collaboration, and advocacy, alPHa's members and staff act to promote public health policies that form a strong foundation for the improvement of health promotion and protection, disease prevention and surveillance services in all of Ontario's communities.