

Public health says available vaccine appointments to increase

By Kristena Schutt-Moore

This year has been hard on many businesses and community organizations. The Hastings Prince Edward Public Health Unit is not much different. During the HPE Board of Health meeting on Wednesday, May 5 the board reviewed the annual audit for 2020.

In 2020 the HPEPH had a total of \$16,184,489 in expenditures, which is an increase of expenses of roughly \$766,649 from the year before.

However, they did end the year with an overall surplus of \$678,606. Which makes the health unit's accumulated surplus a total of \$7,171,956. Of that the auditor says that roughly \$3 million is in the value of tangible assets, \$2.034 million is in reserves and the operation fund is at \$1.548 million.

HPEPH also received \$442,200 from the province to contribute to 'extraordinary costs' in 2020 related to COVID-19. The HPEPH says that the 'extraordinary costs' included overtime for staff, IT equipment and software, PPE supplies, plexiglass, internet and telephone costs and radio advertising.

The medical officer of health report was divided into three parts and presented by medical officer of health Dr. Piotr Oglaza and medical resident Dr. Ethan Toumishey.

Toumishey reported that since the spike of 160 active cases in a single day that Hastings Prince Edward had back at the beginning of April the rate of cases have started to slowly improve. At the time of the meeting the health unit had a total of 72 active cases, including the 15 new cases that came in the day before the meeting.

'We have seen the curve bent through the joint efforts of public health and community efforts,' said Toumishey.

However, the spike in April was due in part with the variants of COVID-19 which are more contagious and infections than the previously dominant strains of the virus. It is because of this there was an increase in the public health measures to try to reduce the spread.

Toumishey said there were several 'drivers' for the recent increased spread, including an increase in social gathering which caused a series of close contacts and number of spreads of COVID-19. As of the May 5 meeting there were six active outbreaks being dealt with. There were three at workplaces, one in a child care setting, one at a congregate care setting (such as a shelter, group home or correctional facility) and one at Quinte Health Care in Belleville. The HPEPH asks that work places and community organizations try to increase their prevention strategies, especially in close quarter areas such as break rooms and lunch rooms.

For every case of confirmed COVID-19 there is an average of 6.8 high risk contacts made. This means that a person confirmed to have COVID-19 can expose on average 6.8 people. This number has increased 2.5 per cent in the last two weeks and 1.4 per cent in the last four weeks. Unfortunately these numbers show that people are becoming complacent with the public health restrictions and may not be fully following them. HPEPH are asking all members of the public to continue to follow the restrictions and guidelines such as washing hands often, stay six feet apart, stay home unless needed, and wear a mask.

'To avoid potential spread of illness, avoid non-essential contact with anyone outside your household,' said Dr. Toumishey. 'If you believe you have come in contact with someone with COVID-19 despite your best efforts, or if you have any symptoms of COVID-19, even mild ones, get tested. This is the best way to identify cases of COVID-19 quickly, and help stop the spread to others.'

As of the May 5 meeting there are 57,538, or 34 per cent, people from Hastings Prince Edward counties have received their first

dose of vaccine and 4,098, or 2 per cent, have had their second dose of vaccine. The health unit hopes to be able to increase these numbers as they have been able to get a 'stable and reliable increase in vaccine supply.' As of Thursday, May 6 the health unit has expanded the eligibility for COVID-19 vaccinations. In June the health unit plans to open another vaccination clinic at the Quinte Sport and Wellness Centre to help offer vaccines in a larger volume of appointments.

The vaccines have also been shown to work against the various variants of the virus. HPEPH says the new variants are becoming the dominant then the original and spread more quickly and have a higher risk of death.

The vaccine clinic appointments are currently available to:

? Individuals turning 50 and over in 2021;

? Individuals with high-risk health conditions;

? First Nations, Inuit and Métis individuals (in addition to the other channels previously available to book their appointment);

? People who cannot work from home who fall under Group One, which includes:

? Agriculture and farm workers

? Education workers in elementary and secondary schools

? Enforcement, inspection and compliance roles (bylaw enforcement, building inspectors, food inspectors, border inspection officers, labour inspectors, and WSIB field workers)

? Foster care agency workers (including customary care providers)

? Food manufacturing and distribution workers

? Funeral, crematory, and cemetery workers

? Workers responding to critical events (police, fire, special constables, children's aid society workers, infrastructure restoration workers)

? Priority groups previously required to book by phone.

Those interested in booking an appointment to get a vaccine is asked to book online at www.ontario.ca/bookvaccine or call the provincial vaccine booking line at 1-833-943-3900. The call line is open from Monday to Sunday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Dr. Oglaza said, 'It is important to get a vaccine to protect not only themselves but family, friends and loved ones.'

In regards to the concern over the unique syndrome that has been caused by the AstraZeneca, he said that he understood the concern however he said the risk was small. The blood clotting syndrome caused by the vaccine affects roughly one in 100,000 people who get the vaccine. Dr. Oglaza said the risk of blood clotting if infected by COVID-19 is one in 100 people, and if the symptoms are bad enough that the patient is hospitalized then the risk is one in 25 people. As Dr. Oglaza put it, 'you are more likely to die from COVID [blood] clots than the AstraZeneca vaccine' and that people 'should not be consulting Google but should be consulting their health care professionals' about what would work for them or not.

For those who are concerned about the type of vaccine they would be getting at a clinic, in the Hastings Prince Edward Public Health Unit's vaccine clinics the most used vaccine is the Pfizer vaccine, as it is the most stable to transport. This means that it is

easier for the health unit to make available in rural communities such as the North Hastings area.