

COVID-19 vaccines 'safe and effective' says Prime Minister

By Nate Smelle

As COVID-19 vaccination programs continue to be rolled out throughout Canada and around the world, humanity is bracing for the fourth wave of the pandemic.

By the time Bancroft This Week went to press on the afternoon of Tuesday, May 4, the global death toll had surpassed 3,216,000, with the number of confirmed cases tallying more than 153.6-million. Currently, in Canada, 24,367 of the 1.25-million+ people who have contracted COVID-19 have lost their lives to the virus. At the same time, Ontario has added 8,143 names to the list of the dead, and more than 477,000 confirmed cases. Also in Ontario Tuesday, the seven-day average continued to fall from the pandemic-high of 4,370 on April 17 to 3,509.

As of Tuesday, Hastings and Prince Edward Public Health confirmed another 15 new cases - one of which in North Hastings - to the 72 on the active list in the region. The health unit also indicated that between the two counties there has been a total of 958 cases and nine deaths due to COVID-19. It also acknowledged that there are currently 18 people hospitalized with COVID-19. According to the health unit, seven of these individuals are receiving care in the Intensive Care Unit - six of whom require a ventilator to breathe.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and chief medical officer of health Dr. Theresa Tam provided Canadians with an update on the federal government's response to the pandemic during a press conference on Tuesday.

Both Trudeau and Tam took turns explaining why vaccination is such a critical step towards overcoming the pandemic. Acknowledging how Canadians are part of a global solution, Trudeau said the federal government considering requiring international travelers from other countries including the United States to possess a vaccine passport. While Trudeau did not indicate whether Canada would vote in favour of a request made by India and South Africa for the World Trade Organization to waive patent protections preventing poorer countries access to vaccines, he said, "Canada well understands that this pandemic isn't over anywhere, until it is over everywhere."

Attesting to the importance of getting as many people vaccinated as quickly as possible, Trudeau said, "That's why at the WTO, with the WHO [World Health Organization], with various partners around the world, we continue to work to ensure - including through COVAX - that there are vaccines available for people all around the world as quickly, and in as large quantities as possible. I know the conversations around patent protections are ongoing, and Canada is actively participating in them, but we understand how important it is to get vaccines to the most vulnerable around the world, and we will keep working for that."

Recognizing how difficult it is for people to get a handle on the evolving science of COVID-19, Dr. Tam said she is "heartened" by how the National Advisory Committee on Immunization is "carefully analyzing" the data collected during the pandemic and the COVID-19 vaccine roll out. Although the evolving data can be confusing for some to understand, she said Canadians can feel confident about getting vaccinated.

NACI has been accused of adding to the public's confusion regarding COVID-19 vaccines after announcing that mRNA vaccines - Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna - were "preferred" over the viral vector-based ones - AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson.

Although the health risks associated with these vaccines are minimal, it has been estimated that anywhere from one case in 100,000 doses to one case in 250,000 could result in a very rare but potentially life-threatening blood-clotting syndrome. Addressing concerns regarding potential health risks associated with the AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines, Dr. Tam said "What I have also heard from chief medical officers is that there is no doubt in their minds - they are experiencing a very a significant resurgence in COVID-19, and seeing ICUs build up, and seeing deaths still occurring across the country - that the AstraZeneca vaccine has really saved lives. The vaccine has done what it was designed to do. And, that the longer you wait to get vaccinated, the longer you are not protected."

Weighing in on these concerns, Trudeau added, "Let me remind everyone that every vaccine administered in Canada is safe and effective, as evaluated by Health Canada. The safety of Canadians is first and foremost. We have seen the tragic impacts of COVID-19 all across the country, and vaccines are one of the key tools to reduce the deaths and the vulnerability of Canadians to COVID-19. That's why we are continuing to recommend to everyone to get vaccinated as quickly as possible; it's so we can get through this, and so we can see case numbers drive down, and we can end so many of these restrictions."

Starting on Thursday, May 6, throughout Ontario anyone 50 years of age or older will be able to sign up to receive the vaccine at: <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/book-vaccine/>. For more information about how to reduce the spread of COVID-19, visit: www.hpePublicHealth.ca. Non-medical emergencies, outbreaks or a reportable disease that requires immediate assistance can be reported by calling: 613-966-5500/1-800-267-2803 and following the prompts.