

Residents of Kawartha Lakes, Northumberland, and Haliburton urged to adhere to stay-at-home order

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Medical officer of health says gathering and travelling are the main causes of the virus spreading locally

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Dr. Ian Gemmill, acting medical officer of health for Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit, during a virtual media briefing on January 13, 2021. (YouTube screenshot)

The acting medical officer of health for the Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit expects every person to adhere to the stay-at-home order, apart from “logical, necessary, and approved reasons.”

During a virtual media briefing on Wednesday (January 13), Dr. Ian Gemmill said he is “fully supportive” of the restrictions announced by Premier Ford on Tuesday afternoon, including the stay-at-home order that goes into effect just after midnight on Thursday.

“I hope it will have the desired effect for getting a better handle, a better control, on this virus,” Dr. Gemmill said.

In provincial modelling data presented Tuesday morning at Queen’s Park, Ontario’s top public health officials said mobility and contacts between people have not decreased under current restrictions.

Without the stay-at-home order, “we would be in very serious condition four weeks from now,” Dr. Gemmill said. “Gathering and travelling is the cause of much of the spread I have seen.”

“We are expecting every person to be staying at home except for essential work, medical, or health-related appointments, and issues like medications, groceries, exercise, and family emergencies. There are no other reasons.”

Dr. Gemmill also emphasized the importance of adhering to the stay-at-home order even for residents of potentially lower-risk areas, such as Haliburton.

“I think the fact that someone lives in a small, lower-tiered township is neither here nor there,” he explained. “Every winter’s virus will eventually affect all areas. For that reason, people in no area should think ‘This shouldn’t affect me, I don’t have to worry about this.’”

“We need to make sure that our health system is able to accommodate not just people with coronavirus, but people with other illnesses. People still have heart attacks, people still have strokes, people still get cancer. Those things aren’t going away.”

According to Tuesday’s provincial modelling data report, Ontario’s health care system is becoming overwhelmed, with COVID-19 ICU occupancy now at over 400 beds. Surgeries are being cancelled and “the access to care deficit will continue to increase with real consequences for health”.

“We are in a race against this virus,” Dr. Gemmill said. “Some people are making it easy for the virus to win.”

“If we are going to win this race, we need to stop helping the virus along the way by gathering and travelling,” he added, urging the importance of holding off people from getting sick until the vaccine is widely available. “We have hope now, through a vaccine.”

As for the vaccine rollout, Dr. Gemmill said the health unit hopes to begin phase one of distributing the Pfizer vaccine to residents, staff, and essential caregivers at area long-term care homes in early February. However, this is subject to change based on the availability of the vaccine.

“We are in the process of planning for this ... dusting off our mass immunization plan and working with our partners in the health sector and municipal sector and others to be ready,” he said. “Not only for phase one but also when we move into phase two.”

Phase two of the vaccine rollout — which will include essential workers, older adults, and eventually all community members who wish to be vaccinated — will take place sometime later in the spring to early summer, according to Dr. Gemmill.

Dr. Gemmill has high hopes for the Pfizer vaccine, calling it “one huge bright light that we have. It is going to be the magic bullet if we can get it into the arms of people before they get sick.”

A minimum of 70 per cent of the population must be immunized to achieve herd immunity — community-wide protection from the virus.

Dr. Gemmill said the health unit currently does not have the required facilities to store the Pfizer vaccine, so it is likely to be transferred by other facilities nearby. The health unit is currently in discussion with the province about how they are to receive the Pfizer vaccine, which will allow them to determine to which long-term care homes will first receive it.

Until then, Dr. Gemmill stressed that adhering to the stay-at-home order is critical, even for people who may think it is okay if they get sick.

“Every person is only two or three degrees of separation away from a possibly vulnerable person,” he pointed out. “You can’t pretend this is 2019. It’s not. We are in the very middle of an illness that is clogging up the health system and is killing a section of the population that would otherwise be okay.”

As of Wednesday afternoon, there are 64 active cases of COVID-19 in the region served by the Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit, including 32 in the City of Kawartha Lakes, 30 in Northumberland County, and two in Haliburton County.

There have been five COVID-related deaths in the region so far this year, including three in Kawartha Lakes and two in Northumberland — with the most recent being the death of a resident at Hope Street Terrace long-term care home in Port Hope.

Comments
