



NEWS

Will the health unit start breaking down COVID-19 data by local communities?

Further guidance, coming decision on 'what is the right way to do this' may shape future reporting

By [Sarah Hyatt](#) Northumberland News

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There could be changes coming with respect to COVID-19 data reporting at the local level.

A decision on this, following a request put forward to the [Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario](#), is anticipated in the near future, Dr. Ian Gemmill, the [Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit's](#) acting medical officer of

health, has confirmed.

Consistently throughout the pandemic, a burning, reoccurring request among residents, has been for the health unit to break down COVID-19 data and cases by community versus the current structure, which is at the county level between Northumberland, Kawartha, and Haliburton. Many have expressed frustration with the process amid rising cases, while also arguing other communities are given this info.

“This is an ongoing issue that I think needs to get resolved and will be getting resolved ... over the next few weeks,” said Gemmill, as he fielded media questions about the data the health unit is and isn’t releasing during a first-time virtual pandemic information forum. “It’s not an issue just here – it’s an issue in other places, I know.”

“And in the absence of provincial guidelines about how to do this, of course every local board or public health agency is doing their presentation of their case count in different ways,” Gemmill said, noting he has reviewed case reporting of several public health agencies, particularly in eastern Ontario, but also beyond into Toronto and other areas.

It’s a “mixed bag,” he said. “We’re not the only ones who are doing it by county.”

He did also echo previous health officials’ comments about the rationale behind releasing data at the higher county level only, in particular with respect to privacy concerns and protecting personal health information.

Especially in those smaller areas, by identifying positive cases, there is concern there’s the potential to easily identify those people, said Gemmill, stressing in some instances, there is also stigma attached to cases.

But, moving forward, it sounds as though further guidance could help shape future reporting.

"There has been a request made to Ontario’s information and privacy commissioner, and I actually welcome that. And we expect ... that we will hear in the next couple to three weeks about what is the right way to do this, and we will be guided by that and whatever the information and privacy commissioner suggests to us we are going to do.”

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Gemmill also hopes this might set a standard for across Ontario. That way, with those similar processes, there won't be the kind of inconsistency that causes questions and so on, he said.

Either way, everyone should be behaving as though, when with other people, you're potentially being exposed, stressed the health unit's top official. That's another part of the argument against revealing case counts at those smaller levels, because it shouldn't change anyone's behaviour or affect risk, Gemmill said.

"We should be behaving all day, every day, as though coronavirus is around, and we should be protecting ourselves."

As for how Gemmill feels about data reporting in this instance, he said he had "no really strong feelings about this." He added that he believes in transparency, and that public health should be giving as much information as people need to understand what's happening.

But, the most important thing people should understand, he said, is that this winter's virus is on the way up in wave two and people need to be guided by that.

"The fact that somebody lives in ... like a small, lower-tier township, I think is neither here nor there, but if the guidance indicates that we should be doing it in a specific way, we will be doing that."

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