

# No residents got West Nile

By JASON MISNER  
The Champion

Halton has gone from being North America's West Nile virus hot spot last year to recording no cases of human infection this year.

The public was saturated with media coverage and public service announcements throughout the spring and summer about the mosquito-borne virus and its dangers. And despite regional health staff being kept busy addressing West Nile, thankfully the threat never really materialized in Halton this year.

"One of the most remarkable findings is Halton has zero human cases," Halton Medical Officer of Health Dr. Bob Nosal said in an interview. "The news could have not been better."

Dr. Nosal - noting the West Nile season is "essentially over" - said it's interesting that Halton was one of the few municipalities in and around the GTA that had no West Nile human cases.

There were 43 such cases in Toronto, 10 in Peel, four in Hamilton and one in York. All those numbers, though, were down this year from the previous year, and overall Ontario experienced 73 per cent fewer human cases this year compared to last year.

Former Burlington resident John Stevens was the first person in Canada diagnosed with West Nile, and he's ecstatic by the Halton results.

After contracting the virus in

July of 2002, he suffered from "excruciating" muscle/joint pain and a body rash, among other things.

Mr. Stevens, who moved to Brantford three months ago, credits the Halton health department for its doggedness to fight West Nile.

"Maybe a whole lot less people will suffer from it and hopefully it will carry on," he said, noting he suffers fatigue occasionally as a result of contracting the virus.

But while encouraged by the results, Dr. Nosal warned there's no telling what next year will bring. That's why there will be a West Nile prevention and surveillance program in place in 2004 and it could mirror this year's, Dr. Nosal said.

"It's reasonable to assume that much, if not all of what we did this year, we will probably do the same again next year," he said. "We're in the process of setting the 2004 budget and obviously those kinds of things have to be considered."

The program was created largely because of the blows inflicted by the virus last year - 60 human cases and one death. Halton was the first Ontario municipality to enact a West Nile program.

The vaulted battle plan included larviciding - the dropping of pesticide pellets - approximately 35,000 catch basins and 62 standing pools of water, as well as intense public education and surveillance and monitoring of the virus in humans, mosquitoes and

birds. Dr. Nosal said quick testing of mosquito traps for the virus was key.

"There was timely data on where the high activity was," he said.

There were 19 positive mosquito pools found this year versus a whopping 74 last year.

The program's public education component was instrumental in fighting West Nile, Dr. Nosal said, including the urgency to remove mosquito breeding sites like standing water.

"Clearly the public got the message about the things they needed to do and that may very well have played a role," he said.

Adulticiding - or fogging - was an option if the West Nile situation ever worsened, but it wasn't used.

The West Nile program ended up costing about \$1 million, of which half is expected to be paid by the Ontario government. The Province will also pay the full costs of buying larviciding pellets.

Dr. Nosal also said a cooler, wetter spring and the natural history of the disease seemed to help control the virus's impact.

Meanwhile, the much-awaited report documenting the results of an Oakville blood study is expected to be released soon. The study concludes how many of 1,505 volunteers sampled previously contracted the virus and didn't know it.

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