

Board of Health Meeting  
Dr. Vera Etches – Verbal report  
November 6, 2023

Good afternoon, Kwey, Unusakut (oo-nah-sa-coot), Taanishi, Ahnii, Bonjour.

Tonight, I will provide updates on fall respiratory illnesses, measles and a staffing announcement.

But first, I want to acknowledge the deep sorrow, anger, hopelessness, numbness and fear that many residents of Ottawa are feeling due to the tragic loss of life in the Middle East.

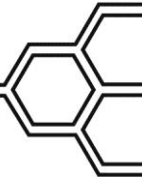
I have heard that many who have survived the horrors of previous global conflicts are reliving their trauma.

Many are also feeling the fearful and de-humanizing effects of rising anti-Semitism, anti-Palestinian racism and Islamophobia. As part of our role in monitoring the health of our local population, Ottawa Public Health is concerned about the physical as well as psychosocial impacts of these developments on faith communities, on the broader community and on OPH staff. People need a sense of safety and security to be well in body, mind and spirit. That's why Ottawa Public Health works to promote inclusion and equity, which can improve the health outcomes of all Ottawa residents.

And that's why over the past weeks, I have heard directly from many faith leaders and explored ways to support them as they provide spiritual care to their congregations.

We are also working to increase access to information on how to help children cope with stressful times and to services that can address post-traumatic stress disorder and other types of mental distress. Within OPH, we are fostering a supportive workplace that is grounded in inclusion and care for our common humanity. We continue to promote social connection as a way to support our colleagues who feel lonely, helpless, or unsafe. Part of helping our respective communities feel safe is to be careful in the use of our words and speaking with sensitivity to the anguish that members of Arab, Jewish and Muslim communities are experiencing. As a community, we must counter hate speech in all forms.

As this conflict sadly continues to unfold, OPH will continue to monitor the mental health needs of Ottawa residents and improve what we can through empathy, respectful



listening and meaningful relationship building and acting on what we learn, within our scope and partnering with others to effect change.

### **Update on Fall Respiratory Illnesses**

We're seeing levels of COVID-19 circulating in our community remain high. Respiratory syncytial virus or RSV activity is moderate and increasing and we are now also seeing low and increasing flu activity.

The fall respiratory illness season can have significant impacts on how we live, work and play.

I want to encourage people to continue to maintain social connections and physical activity throughout the season, as such activities are important to our overall health, including mental health. At the level of the whole population, we see more protection against severe disease from prior vaccination and infections. Using your layers of protection continues to be a simple and effective way to reduce your risk of illness and decrease transmission of respiratory illness in our community.

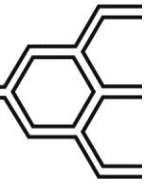
What is a top concern is that a significant proportion of older adults have still not had an infection and not enough older adults are yet taking advantage of updated vaccines as an important layer of protection.

As of October 30<sup>th</sup>, all Ontario residents 6 months and older are eligible to receive their annual influenza (flu) vaccine and the updated XBB COVID-19 vaccine. COVID-19 and influenza (flu) immunization is particularly important for older adults who are at increased risk of severe illness and hospitalization from these viruses.

As of October 30, 2023, 9% of Ottawa residents aged 5 and older have received a COVID-19 booster dose in the last 6 months.

Currently, only 18% of 60 to 69-year-olds, 36% of 70 to 79-year-olds and 38% of residents aged 80 years and older have received their COVID-19 booster. I strongly encourage people 60 and older to get their COVID booster to get the added coverage needed to protect against severe illness.

In contrast to COVID-19, we don't have a real-time measure of flu vaccination coverage among Ottawa residents throughout the respiratory season. If uptake is similar to last season, we might expect about 50% of Ottawa adults to get vaccinated against the flu (RRFSS 2023), with higher rates among older adults. However, given the concurrent



rollout of the flu vaccine with the COVID-19 XBB vaccine, uptake thus far for flu vaccine has been more rapid than last year, in part due to earlier availability of supply.

Last week, I had the opportunity to receive both my COVID-19 and flu vaccine at the North Gower Pharmacy in the city's rural south end, and I want to thank Councillor David Brown who joined me.

Both COVID-19 and influenza vaccines are available through most local pharmacies and some primary care providers. As OPH does not lead the distribution of COVID-19 and influenza (flu) vaccines to pharmacies, residents are encouraged to book an appointment or call ahead to ensure availability.

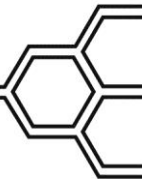
OPH also continues to offer COVID-19 vaccines to all residents through our community clinics and Neighborhood Health and Wellness Hubs. Flu vaccines at OPH clinics are being prioritized for children under 5 and their family members and people without OHIP coverage. OPH clinics have been busy with a very good turnout of residents seeking immunization. We will continue to release vaccine appointments incrementally over the next few weeks as our capacity allows.

To support residents in under-resourced and rural areas, OPH is holding pop-up rural and after school clinics for COVID-19 and flu vaccine throughout November.

These clinics are on a drop-in basis, with no appointment needed, and information is available on OPH's website at [Ottawa Public Health dot CA slash flu](https://ottawapublichealth.ca/flu).

The Ontario Ministry of Health is publicly funding a vaccine program this fall for the RSV vaccine that is newly approved by Health Canada. This program is for individuals 60 years and older living in long-term care homes (LTCHs), including Elder Care Lodges and residents of retirement homes (RHs) licensed to provide dementia care services. OPH is working with eligible long-term care homes and retirement homes to help ensure residents have access to the RSV vaccine and to help build capacity for immunizing their residents by providing training and resources. OPH will support a select number of homes with on-site vaccination that do not have health care workers to administer the vaccine.

OPH also continues to distribute rapid antigen test kits for COVID to ensure high priority populations have access to them.



This is important so that people who test positive can access treatment in a timely manner if they are eligible. Residents are able to access rapid antigen test kits through a number of locations across Ottawa, including libraries, OPH's Neighbourhood Health and Wellness Hubs, and community clinics. Individuals who are at higher risk of severe outcomes and complications from COVID-19 and who test positive on a rapid antigen test are encouraged to speak with their primary healthcare provider or local pharmacist about treatment.

We continue to focus public communications on the prevention and mitigation of respiratory illness in our community and we are working in collaboration with hospital partners, neighbouring public health units, and community partners to inform and align our communication products and targeted outreach.

Most recently, we communicated with parents through school boards and childcare partners and provided information to help them navigate the respiratory illness season. We also provided a social media toolkit for older adult partners like the Canadian Association of Retired Persons, the African, Caribbean and Black Wellness Resource Centre, Aging in Place partners, the Champlain Region Family Council Network, and many other senior centres across the city.

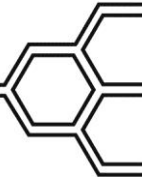
We continue to see an increase in outbreaks of cold and COVID viruses in our long-term care and retirement homes. While outbreaks are increasing, we know that staffing remains a problem at long-term care and retirement homes as well as among our health system partners. We anticipate that the same resourcing issues and capacity problems at community shelters will cause significant strain throughout the respiratory season.

OPH continues to work with the Regional Infection Prevention and Control hub, partner agencies, and community partners to collaborate with long-term care, retirement homes, and congregate living settings to offer ongoing education, support and response to infection prevention and control and outbreak management.

### **Measles**

In mid-October, two Outaouais residents were confirmed to have contracted measles after returning from travel abroad.

OPH was involved in notifying individuals who were exposed to measles in an Ottawa Emergency department. Notifications occurred quickly after the exposure, and OPH supported ensuring that exposed residents received the necessary post-exposure



vaccination. We have now passed the period where we would see secondary cases and we are not aware of any known local transmission.

Planning exercises for a measles response conducted in March 2023 helped prepare for this response, as did close working relationships with regional public health and acute care partners. This event is a good reminder of the importance of ensuring that children are up to date on their routine immunizations.

I am grateful to the team and to our health system partners for their work in responding quickly and effectively to prevent the further spread of infection.

### **Vaping**

Board members would have received, by e-mail, a draft OPH submission to the Health Canada announced public consultation on its second legislative review of the *Tobacco and Vaping Products Act*.

On the same topic, I would like to thank the Government of Ontario for responding to the federal government's invitation to levy an additional excise duty on vaping products intended for sale in Ontario and entering into a coordinated vaping product taxation agreement.

Evidence has shown that increases in tobacco excise taxes (and in this case, vaping products excise taxes) reduce the prevalence, initiation, and uptake of tobacco/vaping product use among young people. Price increases effectively deter the transition from infrequent to regular use.

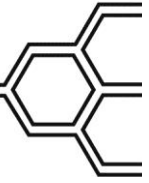
I look forward to our ongoing collaboration as we work to ensure that all residents, and especially youth, are protected from undue harms associated with smoking and vaping.

### **Staffing Announcement**

Lastly, I'd like to introduce Casey Whitar.

On October 16<sup>th</sup> Casey joined Ottawa Public Health as the incoming Coordinator, Legislative Services. Over the next two months she will be transitioning into the role in anticipation of Diane Blais's retirement in January.

Casey has more than 10 years of experience in municipal government, having worked most recently as the Deputy Clerk and Emergency Management Coordinator for Lanark County. In this role, she was responsible for supporting the County Clerk to ensure the



good governance of Lanark County. That included developing and distributing by-laws, resolutions, agendas, minutes, correspondence and reports necessary for the smooth functioning of municipal council and committees. She also developed and implemented the County's emergency preparedness strategies.

In her new role here at OPH, Casey will lead the daily activities to support the Board of Health in fulfilling its duties under Ontario's Health Protection and Promotion Act and the Ontario Public Health Standards. That includes supporting the Chair and ensuring the timely publication and distribution of meeting agendas, minutes, motions and other related documents, and the orderly functioning of the Board's public and in-camera meetings.

Please join me in welcoming Casey to the team.

This concludes my verbal report. I would be happy to take any questions.