

## Did anyone really think this was over?

by SHERALYN ROMAN

The urge to say, "here we go again" is strong today. Not that I was ever so naive as to think the pandemic was wrapping things up, packing its protein spikes away and heading toward oblivion. No, it was far too soon for that and now here we are facing the emergence of yet another new variant, this one given the rather ominous sounding name of Omicron.

Not generally a Star Wars fan, the name sounds vaguely like a doomed planet or a dangerous dark overlord - both of which, technically, I suppose could come true.

If we don't come to some kind of global consensus on how to manage this pandemic and, concurrently, gain the upper hand - it could indeed result in the destruction of our planet - that is if climate change doesn't do that for us first. But I digress. Just in time for the holidays, here we go again with COVID dominating the headlines. Did anyone really think this was over?

Personally, I don't think this pandemic is going anywhere until a number of key things happen. These include both politicians and public health units acting in unison; global vaccine equity is in play and education edges out its social media alter ego - ignorance.

All this IS possible but WILL it ever happen? My fear, of course, is that it will not. Let's address the first point. Politicians and public health units should have the same agenda, that being the health of the general population as priority one. The reality is they don't and perhaps even can't. That because politicians are also responsible for the economy, law and order, roads, public transit and the list goes on. Every decision is informed not just by public health recommendations but also balanced against all these other considerations the government must take into account.

Do I think they could do better? Yes. Do I think they have had numerous "learning opportunities" to do so? Yes. Have they? That's a hard "NO" from me.

Public health may suggest a COVID-related school closure to stop the spread and that makes sense. But that means children sent home, meaning parents need time off work and that, in turn, could on a large enough scale, have a very real economic impact.

Enough COVID in a community and many small businesses could be forced to close down again throwing people out of work. If only public health recommendations to quarantine could actually be followed by employees who COULD take time off when they or their child is sick, without fear of losing their job. If only there were a viable solution? Say, for example, something like paid sick days. If only public health messaging was actually followed AND paid sick days existed so that employees didn't have to choose between paying the mortgage or for their next meal. If only politicians would realize that paid sick days, while costly (we own and operate a small business, believe me, we get it) would ultimately lead to less time off for ALL employees when no one comes to work infected, makes other people sick and then you're left with no choice but to close your entire facility until the outbreak "runs its course."

When it comes to education it would go a long way toward addressing anti-vaxxer misinformation if public health and politicians would stick to the same messaging. It might help to address the legitimate concerns of folks who are simply vaccine hesitant, looking for facts and information, but tripping instead across conspiracy theorists who remain convinced that both politicians and public health are lying to us. They use as "proof" the mixed messaging we receive on the daily as part of their argument. Who can blame them really? Collectively, in the developed world our trust in our leaders is eroding, spurred on by conspiracies and constantly changing guidance. Meanwhile, in developing nations, based on their historical experiences, there is often no trust to begin with.

As this new variant emerges, and so far (talk about mixed messages) I've heard everything from it's a super spreader to it's nothing to worry about, the other thing we must do is stop the debate about WHERE the newest variant is coming from, or who is at "fault" for it and instead focus our energies on vaccinating people AROUND the world.

Without vaccine equity there will be no end to this pandemic. We cannot blame other nations for low vaccine rates when they do not have access to vaccines in the first place. Meanwhile in Canada we're wondering what the delay is in dishing out booster shots AND we are throwing out vaccines. Equal access eradicates disease equally.

Finally, here at home, there's one other thing the politicians can do for us: pay nurses and PSWs adequately for the work they are doing.

Dangerous working conditions, abused by patients, abused by the public, nurses are leaving the profession in droves and patient care is at a critical turning point. One recent shift at an unnamed hospital saw close to 50 patients being cared for by a combination of just six nursing and/or PSW staff. Most of these patients were bedridden and required specialized care. Do we really want someone who is overworked, overlooked, undervalued and underpaid caring for our loved ones, or someone who is fairly compensated for working through a global pandemic, who is respected for their knowledge and care and who has been voluntarily putting themselves in harm's way for us all? Politicians could fix this too and, until they do, public health units are doing the best they can to support people in the community to make up for the lack of hospital nursing staff offering care within the hospital.

How could it be fixed? Mandate vaccination for ALL health care workers to keep everyone safe and repeal Bill 124.

Without consistent education efforts by public health units, supported by politicians, there will no end to the pandemic. Without ceasing the muzzling of scientists by politicians for the sake of business, there will be no end to this pandemic. Without pay equity, vaccine equity and access to time off without penalty and paid sick days, there will be no end to the pandemic.

Those first few months of 2020 were a steep learning curve and forgiveness and fear kept us all compliant. We're closing in on two years now and there are no more excuses. Provincial leaders have had plenty of opportunity to do better: to learn from past missteps and to follow the example of nations excelling at keeping COVID under control. Did anyone really think this was over? Likely not and I'm beginning to think it never will be at this rate.

PS ? a personal message to Dr. Loh, our very own public health unit's top doctor. As public health leaders go, I think you're rocking it and the recent Brampton Batman video was superb! I don't understand the naysayers and respect your decision to pull it for the ?greater good,? but I thought the video and messaging was greater than good!