

Mayor, Dr. Loh emphasize kindness in fourth wave

By Rob Paul

Mayor Allan Thompson last week held a virtual town hall meeting with Peel Medical Officer of Health Dr. Lawrence Loh to discuss the ongoing COVID-19 situation in the Region, including the fourth wave, while also taking questions from the public.

As COVID protocols increase with the proof of vaccination policy being enacted, Thompson began the town hall by focusing on a need to respect the health and safety rules within the community and more specifically those who are asking them to be followed to keep themselves and others safe.

"I want to take a few moments and talk about kindness and how important being kind is at this time more than ever; the Town will be announcing an initiative to encourage and promote kindness in our communities – that's who we are," Thompson said. "I see there's a lot of frustration, anger, and differences of opinion over vaccination policies and other healthcare restrictions. While everyone has the right to express their opinions, we all have the right to live and work in safe places.

"I'm concerned about our frontline workers, our storefront businesses who are being exposed to verbal confrontations and conflicts when they're just trying to follow the rules; they're doing everything they can possibly do to survive these days and we don't need public abuse brought to them for what they're trying to do. Let's all try to be extra kind, we all have personal issues, and we all have the right to have those opinions, but let's respect one another and respect those businesses that are trying to operate. Even with our Town staff at our recreation facilities, please be patient, they're just trying to do their job. I think it's time to get back to basics and being kind to others and respecting each other regardless of whether we agree or not, we're all in this together."

Dr. Loh said he was "very excited" to see this campaign for kindness get off the ground.

"Certainly, in the last couple weeks as a health provider, I have been quite disturbed by the divisive rhetoric that has emerged around vaccination," said Dr. Loh. "I'd preface my remarks this evening by sharing with people who might hold opposing views, it's okay to hold those opposing views. I think you need to understand that those of us in public health and healthcare have worked tirelessly for the last 18 or 19 months and ultimately we have been and continue to be on your side, especially if you do end up getting sick with the virus. Our frontline healthcare providers will continue to see you and continue to take care of you and will always continue to treat you with kindness and empathy. The least we can do is realize that all of us really want the same thing, which is to get through this safely and quickly and make sure we get out to the other end of the acute phase of the pandemic. So, thank you to Mayor Thompson and Caledon for the leadership with that campaign."

With the Province in Step 3 of the reopening, Loh confirmed that the fourth wave has hit Peel, but the situation is different than the previous three waves because of vaccine coverage protecting many residents.

"We are in the midst of a fourth wave here in the Region of Peel unfortunately," Loh said. "The characteristics of the fourth wave have been somewhat different. While cases have gone up, and were anticipated to go up with reopening, what we're seeing, however, is that the hospitalizations and mortality have not been tracking up in the same alignment as we had previously seen. We have now been approximately eight weeks into Step 3 of the Province's reopening plan and the situation at the hospitals, while there are slight increases in hospitalizations across area hospitals in the Region of Peel, this past week saw 41 hospital admissions which was up from 33 the week before. They are holding their own and they're still able to also provide other elective surgeries and other essential surgeries in trying to clear the backlog that built up over the last three waves of the pandemic at this time. While we're in this position because of the very high vaccine coverage rate that we have in our community right now, we must continue to remain vigilant."

Despite many residents being protected by the vaccine during the fourth wave, Loh is pleading with those who have yet to be vaccinated.

He and his team at Peel Public Health are trying to do everything they can to reach those who aren't vaccinated and help them understand why the vaccine is a necessity.

"We must continue to do two important things," he said. "First is really trying to continue to get vaccinations out to the remaining members of our community who haven't yet had the opportunity to access this protection." It's important for me to stress that the data is extremely clear that the vaccines are incredibly effective at reducing severe illness and reducing hospitalizations and ICU usage and also reducing mortality. The vaccines are not 100 per cent; there are very few, if any, vaccines or medicines in the world that are. What happens is there are instances where people who are fully vaccinated may not have mounted as robust of an immune response and may be subject to breakthrough infections. This is why, especially with a large amount of people in our communities remaining unvaccinated, it's still important for us at this time to continue masking and distancing, especially in indoor public places and in crowds outdoors and to also keep gatherings small.

"This is to really ensure we're limiting any possible potential opportunity for transmission, and especially for super spreading events. That's why in the last few weeks the Region of Peel has been noticing, especially with the reopening, increasing exposures in social gatherings. We've been seeing things at weddings, sporting tournaments, in nightclubs and bars, so it's really important for me to remind people not to let your guard down at this point in time. What happens is you see the spread that occurs at the social gatherings and then it gets into homes and into other social gatherings or workplaces or schools or long-term care homes and other settings we're seeking to protect during the reopen. It's really important for us to make sure we're getting vaccinated with two doses and, as we move through this turbulent fourth wave, to still stick to the precautions."

With the concern surrounding the Delta variant, Loh assured residents that the impact will be mitigated as long as people are fully vaccinated, and though he said it's likely other variants will emerge, they too can be held at bay by the vaccine.

"For individuals that are fully vaccinated with two doses in our community, the risk of the Delta variant is significantly diminished," said Loh. "Of the hundred or so people that we analyzed in the ICU over June and July, we found that 101 out of 103 individuals were not fully vaccinated. The two people that were fully vaccinated were people with other preexisting conditions that rendered them unable to mount a robust immune response. For the 1 million-plus people in Peel who have reached two-dose coverage, that really is our strength against a Delta. That's really why the wave in our community right now looks the way it does, opposed to seeing Delta transpire how it is in Australia right now, which doesn't have the same vaccine coverage rates that we do."

"But we still do have a large portion of residents in Peel and Caledon that are susceptible to the virus? 330,000 to be exact in terms of eligible residents who have yet to get to two dose coverage. If the Delta manages to find some of these pockets of unvaccinated individuals, it could drive a pretty significant wave because the proportions still remain the same? 30 per cent hospitalization, 10 per cent ICU, between 1 to 5 per cent of people succumbing."

With the proof of vaccination policy now in place and Ontario as open as it's been in months, Loh wanted to address if there's an end in sight and a more normal way of living will return in the near future.

"What is the endgame, a lot of people have wondered," said Loh. "I think most experts have agreed that eventually this virus is going to go from being pandemic to endemic. Where essentially, it's just a steady state where there are regular infections that do occur, but they don't have the severity or the mortality that are associated with it due to the fact that the virus is no longer novel to the population. If you picture it, right now if you are unvaccinated and you're never been infected with COVID-19, this virus is still as novel to you today as it was in January 2020. What we are trying to do with the vaccine is we are trying to prime your immune system through exposure to a component of the virus so in the event that you actually do come face to face with COVID-19, the chances are you will have a mild illness."

It all comes back to getting the highest vaccine coverage possible for Peel, Ontario, and Canada for COVID-19's immeasurable impact to dissipate says Loh and by having the most people protected, the coronavirus will become manageable in everyday living.

?On one side, vaccines are reducing the novelty of the virus in the population, on the other side, the virus itself is all reducing its novelty in the population with each susceptible host that it infects,? said Loh. ?As the virus continues to chip away at the susceptible population and as our vaccination efforts continue trying to reach those that are still susceptible and unvaccinated, at some point we will get to a level in the community where the vast majority of people have been exposed to the virus either through vaccination or through infection. At that point the waves will stop, and the severity will drop-off because the virus is no longer novel to our population.

?We could get there quicker in Canada if people are willing to increase our vaccination rate more quickly because ultimately that will make the virus less novel to the population. At some point as well, there is a recognition that we do also need to move on as a society so we will continue to monitor trends and ensure that the virus continues to spread in as controlled a fashion as we can, rather than a big surge or spike that has been seen in other places that have lifted measures too quickly too soon. Hopefully, we will eventually get to the point where we can say the virus is no longer novel to our population and it can now be declared an endemic.?