

No confirmed cases of measles in Peel

By Bill Rea

Peel Region health officials are knocking on wood, but they have not yet come up on any confirmed cases of measles.

Acting Medical Officer of Health Dr. Eileen de Villa made the announcement last Thursday as she delivered an update on the measles situation to Regional council.

She concluded her presentation by stating there had been six cases in Toronto and one each in York and Niagara Regions. She added Peel Public Health had been following up with 43 Peel residents who been in contact with measles cases in Toronto. Two young people had been kept home from school or day care, but there had been no cases yet.

She pointed out the illness has been in the news a lot lately, which was the reason for the update she provided.

Around 1991, she said there had been a fair amount of measles activity both in Peel and throughout Ontario. De Villa said it was among the top five diseases at that time, with about 300 cases reported per year in Peel.

At that time, there was a standard of one vaccine per child for measles, but that only provided about 90 per cent coverage. In 1995, there was a provincial outbreak of the disease, and that prompted officials to increase the immunization with a second dose of vaccine, and that brought it up to about 99 per cent.

De Villa said there was a drop in the rates of other illnesses around that time, including meningococcal disease, mumps and pertussis. She said that was partly due to changes and improvements in Provincial immunization programs, which also saw better rates for students being vaccinated through such measures as enforcement. She said the current coverage rate for students in peel is around 96 per cent.

Measles is still a problem world-wide, de Villa said, as it's a leading cause of death among young children. She observed that there were some 122,000 deaths from measles in the world in 2012. Most of those took place in developing countries, and that would have involved other issues, such as poor nutrition.

She also commented that Canada has been free from endemic measles since 1998, although there are some cases. She said most of them were introduced from outside the country. There were 57 cases in Ontario between 2009 and 2014, she said. In March and April, 2014, the health department followed up on more than 1,000 contacts, and two cases in Peel.

De Villa stressed that measles is very contagious that can spread through coughing and sneezing. She said people who have not had two doses of vaccine, or have not had measles in the past, are at risk. The disease is still contagious until four days after a red rash appears, and she said it could take up to 21 days for symptoms to present themselves.

The symptoms can often be dismissed as something else, like high fever, cold-like symptoms (cough, runny nose, etc.), sore eyes or sensitivity to light, small spots with white centres inside the mouth and a red rash lasting four to seven days. De Villa said it's usually the rash that gives it away.

“Measles is not an easy diagnosis to make,” she said.

De Villa said measles can also lead to complications, like pneumonia in five to 10 per cent of cases, encephalitis, impacting the central nervous system in possibly one out of 1,000 cases, and sometimes death. She added children younger than five are at most risk of complications. Being exposed to measles during pregnancy could result in premature labour, miscarriage or low birth weight. The precautionary measures against measles include immunization, following up on cases and their contacts and reducing possible exposures in high-risk settings.

De Villa said two doses of vaccine are recommended for anyone born after 1970, as anyone who came into the world before that is considered immune. The first dose should be administered around the first birthday.

She also pointed out that not everyone can be immunized. Some children are too young, and others have their immunity compromised. But getting enough people immunized can help protect those who are at risk.

De Villa told Caledon Councillor Annette Groves there is usually a positive response if parents are contacted when their kids have missed immunization.

“We absolutely do get very good responses,” she said.