

April 14, 2021

The Hon. Christine Elliott
Minister of Health
Ministry of Health
5th Floor, 777 Bay St.
Toronto, ON
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The Hon. Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education
Ministry of Education
5th Floor, 438 University Ave.
Toronto, ON
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Re: Routine Immunizations During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dear Ministers Elliott and Lecce,

With National Immunization Awareness Week taking place later this month, I am writing to share the feedback from some members of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce's (OCC) [Health Policy Council](#) with respect to routine immunizations during the pandemic. While the province is rightly focused on the roll-out and distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine, there are concerns that routine immunizations – for children and adults – have declined sharply during COVID-19.

There are several reasons for this decline. First, as outlined in the OCC's report entitled, [Realizing the Full Potential of Virtual Care](#), fewer patients are visiting their physicians during COVID-19. Many Ontarians were hesitant to visit their primary care provider for routine immunization(s) and other health care services due to fear they could contract the coronavirus, an issue known as the "cost of contact." Second, although we have seen the rapid acceleration of virtual care in the last year, it is not conducive to every health care interaction, including vaccinations which must be administered in-person.

Finally, with in-class learning being intermittent since March 2020, school-based immunizations also ceased in the last 12 months which could have adverse consequences. The cancellation or postponement of scheduled vaccinations puts children at risk for common and serious infections. If childhood and adult routine immunizations do not resume, this situation could lead to the outbreak of vaccine-preventable diseases in Ontario (i.e., measles, mumps, whooping cough, meningitis, chicken pox, rubella, and human papillomavirus or HPV). In the long-run, disruptions in school-based immunization programs could also lead to an increase in cancers caused by Hepatitis B and HPV, such as liver and cervical cancers, respectively. These cancers can be prevented through the administration of Hepatitis B and HPV vaccines.

A century ago, infectious diseases were the leading cause of death around the world. Routine immunizations have significantly reduced illnesses and deaths in Canada. According to Immunize Canada, infectious diseases now [account](#) for less than five percent of all deaths in Canada. This owes to effective immunization programs that help prevent the spread of infectious diseases and protect Canadians and communities.

While CanAge's report entitled [Adult Vaccination in Canada: Cross-Country Report Card 2021](#) gave Ontario a B-rating for immunizations among older adults, the province cannot be complacent. CanAge's report also gave Ontario an F when it comes to access to vaccines. Immunizations are a cost-effective public health strategy that improves health outcomes, keeps vulnerable populations like seniors out of hospitals, and helps prevent future costs to the health care system. As businesses, schools, and public spaces eventually re-open, the provision of routine immunizations should be a high priority for policymakers and relevant stakeholders to prevent future outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases in Ontario.

Accordingly, the Government of Ontario should consider the following recommendations:

- 1. Develop a strategy in partnership with the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Public Health Units, and school boards to address the students who missed their routine immunization(s) as schools shifted to virtual learning in March 2020.**
 - There are grade seven students who did not complete their routine immunization schedule during the 2019-2020 school year. These students may have missed the entire vaccine series for HPV, Hepatitis B, and meningococcal infections. These students will soon enter high school and are a specific cohort that need to be prioritized.
 - This strategy should also include a plan for Fall 2021 to avoid further disruptions in routine immunizations with school-based vaccination programs.
 - Additional resources should be allotted to ensure public health has the capacity to address the backlog of missed vaccinations for children and youth.

- 2. Leverage existing public education and social media campaigns to encourage Ontarians to stay on top of their routine immunizations (i.e., pneumonia, shingles, and HPV).**
 - [AskOntarioDoctors.ca](#) and [Immunize Canada](#) have a wealth of information and answers to common questions about infectious diseases and immunizations. This information could be leveraged by the province for ongoing or planned public education and social media campaigns that aim to improve uptake of routine immunizations that have been missed during the pandemic.
 - Primary care providers also play an important role when it comes to tackling vaccine literacy and hesitancy as patients place significant trust in their doctors for accurate information.

- 3. Improve access to missed immunizations by considering the role pharmacists and new models of care can play in administering routine vaccinations.**

Ontario is at a critical juncture and there are concerns that, once Ontarians receive their COVID-19 vaccine, physical distancing measures are relaxed, and domestic and international travel resumes, vaccine-preventable diseases could spread if routine immunizations are not prioritized. For example, if a measles outbreak were to occur, this could create an additional public health challenge at a time when the province, our health care system, and the economy is grappling with COVID-19. An infectious disease outbreak would put the progress that governments and Ontarians have made in combatting the coronavirus in jeopardy.

Again, we appreciate the opportunity to raise the concerns from our members in advance of National Immunization Awareness Week. When taken together, the recommendations outlined in this letter could deter an avoidable public health challenge and ensure Ontario workers can fully contribute to economic recovery.

Sincerely,



Rocco Rossi
President and CEO
Ontario Chamber of Commerce

CC: The Hon. Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario
The Hon. Raymond Cho, Minister for Seniors and Accessibility
The Hon. Victor Fedeli, Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade
Helen Angus, Deputy Minister of Health, Ministry of Health
Colleen Geiger, President and Chief Executive Officer, Public Health Ontario (Acting)