

November 2, 2020

**Re: Effective Action to Regain Control of the COVID Epidemic in Manitoba**

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Last Friday some of us expressed our concerns publicly and implored the provincial government to take effective action to regain control of the COVID epidemic in Manitoba. Our group includes a dozen former physician leaders and scientists in infectious diseases and epidemiology.

Over the weekend we reached out to the leadership of both Shared Health and Public Health to discuss the current situation and offer advice, support and reassurance that our intention was not to undermine those entrusted to carry us through this crisis.

On Monday, Premier Pallister defended his new set of restrictions and announced more strict enforcement and the possibility of a curfew. While we applaud these measures, we remain deeply concerned.

The daily rate of new infections and the test positivity rate have tripled in the last two weeks and continue to rise rapidly. Hospitalizations and ICU admissions have also tripled and currently represent the transmission levels as they were two weeks ago. That means that we can expect these numbers to triple again in the next 14 days and double or triple again by the end of the month. Inadequate testing and contact tracing capacity coinciding with a very high rate of community transmission (a new COVID patient now infects on average 2.5 more people) indicates that the situation is now out of control. We are convinced that more drastic measures are required to reduce personal contacts. These measures must remain until the rate of community spread falls dramatically so that our testing and contact tracing capacity is sufficient to control outbreaks.

Another source of concern is hospital capacity. While significant ICU surge capacity may be created, its potential extent will be hampered by a limited supply of critical care nurses and isolation rooms. Clinical leaders are doing their very best to optimize these resources but we cannot expect them to prevent the adverse outcomes that will inevitably result, not only for patients with COVID, but those who will wait longer for urgent surgery, diagnostic tests and cancer treatments. The attempts to stretch resources to accommodate rapidly increasing cases will place care workers at much higher risk of infection and compound our manpower challenges.

We know that everyone wants to soldier through this but it would be a great disservice to imply that we are adequately prepared and that all will be fine. Based on these concerns, in addition to current measures we are urging the government to enact the following recommendations province wide for three weeks:

Concerted efforts should be made to extend virtual learning. Elementary schools and kindergartens can remain open but secondary and post-secondary in-class instruction should be suspended.

Non-essential retail and service businesses should shut down.

Fourteen day self-isolation requirement for all out of province travellers and visitors should be reimposed.

There should be stringent occupancy limits for essential retail and service establishments including grocery stores. Expanded operating hours could help.

Cessation of all public indoor gatherings of any kind is vital.

Gatherings should be limited to household members only.

In addition to the above we encourage outsourcing of COVID testing which has succeeded in some other provinces. This will improve capacity and reduce the current burden on our hospital laboratories.

We applaud the First Nation communities and their leadership for their successful efforts to date and encourage all levels of government to provide them with the necessary resources to support their ongoing prevention and containment efforts.

Although we are aware that there will be negative financial, social and mental health consequences arising from these measures we are convinced that ignoring them will very likely result in a much more severe and protracted lock down and a greater number of preventable deaths.

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