

September 1, 2021

Honorable Audrey Gordon
Minister of Health and Seniors Care
Government of Manitoba
Rm 333 - 450 Broadway
Legislative Building
Winnipeg, MB R3C 0V8

Dear Ms. Gordon,

As physicians who take deeply to heart our duty to care and advocate for the well-being of Manitobans, we address this letter directly to government and public health leaders as well as our fellow citizens.

Manitoba's current pandemic situation is much different from what we experienced before the third wave in the spring of 2021:

- The fourth wave is being dominated by the delta variant, which has increased risk of transmission. Manitoba will not be able to achieve the double vaccination level needed to avoid this next wave, and therefore public health measures to decrease airborne transmission are more important than ever.
- Although double vaccination significantly protects individuals from severe illness and death from COVID-19, even a doubly immunized person can be infected with COVID-19 virus and can transmit the virus to others.
- The fourth wave will differentially impact unvaccinated individuals, which include children who are ineligible for vaccination at this time. Severe COVID-19 infection in children, while tragic, was previously uncommon, however, the experience in other countries suggests that waves dominated by the delta variant are associated with higher levels of severe illness, hospitalization or even death among children. In addition, fully immunized individuals, particularly seniors, who may not be sufficiently protected due to underlying illness or to waning immunity due to lapsed time since vaccination are also at higher risk with delta infection. Therefore, prevention activities must be focussed on schools, chronic care facilities, hospitals, and senior Manitobans.
- Our emergency rooms, hospital wards and intensive care units are now filled to capacity despite the relatively low numbers of COVID cases over the summer. This is a consequence of over a year of burnout and resignations of health workers, nursing shortages, inadequate and inequitably distributed resources, and delays in medical investigations, surgery and other therapies.
- Manitobans have now experienced months of economic and mental health hardship with lockdowns and school closures. We have an absolute duty as a society to ensure the well-being of our children, and to that end keeping schools safe and open is an urgent priority. Many children have already fallen behind in so many ways. We must take proactive measures to protect them and to keep schools open.

In June, we drew attention to the need to use the summer to plan urgently and wisely, particularly with regard to securing the safe September reopening of schools in the face of an anticipated fourth wave fueled by the delta variant. We strongly endorse the mask and vaccine mandates announced last week by Manitoba government, as they will be important in our defense against this virus and will protect Manitobans. However, with the imminent reopening of schools and the beginning of the fourth wave in Canada, further action is required.

We are writing at this time to plead with the government to:

1. **Urgently evaluate and remediate ventilation and filtration in classrooms.** If air quality cannot be remediated, then contingency plans for alternative learning spaces need to be developed. Due to the airborne nature of COVID and increased transmissibility of the delta variant, school band, singing, and

contact sports activities pose high risk for transmission especially in unvaccinated children. These activities require enhanced mitigation strategies or should be postponed until safe.

2. **Expand vaccine mandates to include first responders.** This is required to protect the vulnerable population that they serve.
3. **Legislate full paid sick leave for infected or quarantined Manitoba workers.** This is required to keep workers and their workplaces safe.
4. **Increase capacity for COVID-19 testing and contact tracing.** Due to increased transmissibility of Delta, this is urgently required to identify infections early and limit the size of outbreaks when they occur.
5. **Urgently consider having a 3rd vaccine dose available for high risk individuals, including immunocompromised individuals, the elderly living in communal settings, and frontline healthcare workers.** Even a small absentee rate in healthcare workers- which will almost certainly be exacerbated by parents needing to stay home with sick or quarantined children - could bring our health care system to its knees.

Manitoba must learn from past failures and lost opportunities to act in a timely and decisive manner. Some excellent steps have recently been taken by our government and public health, however, more is needed. The delta variant is more dangerous and it strikes us now as our health system is extraordinarily weakened.

We urge Manitoba government and health authorities to enact the above recommendations to ensure that Manitobans are protected from another devastating wave, and that our schools and businesses remain open and safe.

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