

## Second lockdown avoided once again ? for now ? but hospitals reach ?tipping point?

Another week, another lockdown avoided, at least for now, but York Region hospitals say they have now reached a ?tipping point? in managing the volume of COVID-19 cases.

In a joint statement issued Tuesday by the CEOs of Southlake Regional Health Centre, Mackenzie Health, and Markham-Stouffville Hospital, they urged the public to remain vigilant as new cases of the virus continue to climb.

?We have reached a tipping point in our efforts to manage COVID-19 related volumes at our hospitals,? they said. ?After seeing a significant increase over the last week in the number of COVID-19 patients admitted to our hospitals, we are concerned about how this may impact access to care like scheduled surgeries for all patients across our communities.

?We are counting on our communities to help keep our staff, physicians and volunteers safe so they can continue to care for everyone who relies on us for care, for COVID-related illnesses, as well as non-COVID-related illnesses and emergencies. While we have seen strong collaboration amongst healthcare organizations across York Region to help prepare for and manage the second wave of COVID-19 thus far, what we need now more than ever is support from our communities to be vigilant in following Public Health guidance aimed at slowing the spread.?

Between November 27 and December 4, York Region recorded 1,306 new cases of COVID-19.

York Region's avoidance of a second lockdown this week came just a day after Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, told Regional Council that recently completed modelling showed moving the Region from its current Red (Control) zone to a Grey (Lockdown) Zone would have minimal impact on the community.

?Overall, our case volumes have increased slightly in the most recent weeks, but the seven-day average had actually plateaued earlier in the week and only increased in the last few days ? and the steepness of the increase is somewhat blunted,? said Dr. Kurji. ?We have also indicated that our incidence rate per 100,000 continues to trend below that of Toronto and Peel Region and our positivity rate remains unchanged at 5.8 per cent.?

Over the previous week, the Region had seen a similar number of ongoing outbreaks, such as those in workplaces, in previous weeks, with institutional outbreaks seeing a slight uptick.

The number of new hospitalizations, Dr. Kurji added, have seen a decline, a marked contrast to other hospitals in the GTA.

?[Assessing hospital capacity] is a complex problem?because our hospitals in York Region are now taking in patients from the GTA, but I have regular conversations with our three presidents and my sense is they are coping, but they are having greater challenges,? he continued. ?Sometimes their ICUs are full, sometimes they have issues with staffing levels, but they are coping.?

The capacity of Public Health is also coping, he said, with the team able to reach 88 per cent of all cases within 24 hours.

With additional orders made before Black Friday to require malls and retail establishments to put increased emphasis on physical distancing and line management, Dr. Kurji said it was important to give these additional measures ? what he described as ?Red+? ? time to be evaluated as to their efficacy before lockdown is considered again.

?My appeal is we continue to stay in the Red Zone and monitoring ourselves. The Ministry will have major challenges with equity as it relates to other jurisdictions that have been put into the lockdown zone previously and those that are in consideration for being put in the lockdown zone now. With respect to that, places like Toronto and Peel when they went into the lockdown zone, they were having major challenges with their hospitals not having the right capacities, or so it was reported, and also with respect to public

health capacities being quite overwhelmed.

?We in York Region do not have those same issues. Yes, our hospitals are challenged, but we're not hearing the same sort of crisis calls we were hearing from some hospitals in Toronto when they went into lockdown. Our public health capacities are holding up and we have every confidence we will continue to do the very good case and contact management and outbreak control ? which in my opinion is the most important area to get our numbers down and keep them down.?

Going forward, keeping the capacity of Public Health high is not only important now, but particularly in the future when COVID-19 vaccines are ready to be rolled out.

?We continue to reinforce our case and contact management manpower,? said Dr. Kurji. ?We have gotten 14 individuals from the Ministry of Health and we have another 20 coming to assist us with contact management. Kingston Public Health Unit continues to assist us with 20 to 30 cases per day. We also have 22 epidemiology students and have just started our hiring efforts to get about 30 registered nurses and registered practical nurses for immunization efforts and we will continue to use them under contact management and case management prior to that.?

**By Brock Weir**EditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter