

Southlake remains cautious after a year of COVID-19

Just because stores are now allowed to reopen, don't take that as a cue to have people over to your house for gatherings, says Arden Krystal, President & CEO of Southlake Regional Health Centre.

It has now been a year since the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in York Region and, as the second wave of the virus continues to show signs of decline, lessons from the first wave continue to inform the hospital's and community's response to combatting the virus.

"We assembled an Emergency Operations Centre here in early February and we did that because both myself and several people on our senior team had lived through SARS and H1N1 and we had a sneaking suspicion on what this could look like of course, none of us dreamed it would go on this long, but we knew that when a pandemic hits you certainly have to be prepared," says Ms. Krystal.

In those early days of preparing for what was coming, Ms. Krystal says there was a mixture of "fear and excitement" which quickly gave way to worry about supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). It was an issue, she says, that kept her up at night the most.

"In Wave One, we literally dropped everything and we were in the Emergency Operations Centre seven days a week when we started to get COVID admissions," she says, noting that one of the reasons why there was so much work to do in the initial stages was the evolving raft of guidelines, policies and procedures being handed down by the upper levels of government.

Staff had to be trained, all masks needed to be tested, and things needed to be changed on the fly as the medical community learned more about the virus and how it operates.

"We were learning new things every day and changing things up," she says. "It was all hands on deck and it really didn't matter what your role was. I think the second wave has definitely been more challenging for everyone and that is because in the summer we resumed some of our activity. We have had less beds to go around, if you will, because we have more activity coming in that is not COVID, but also the burden of COVID really went up and that has put a lot more pressure on staff, physicians and on our bed complement.

"People are tired, too. They haven't had their normal occasions, they can't [go on vacation] or whatever it is they normally do for stress relief. A lot of our people here have had the stress of trying to manage virtual learning, having elderly relatives they can't see. Our people who work here have all the things that every other person has, plus they have had to come in and work with COVID people all day.

"With more prevalence in the community, particularly right up to Christmas, [there were] a significant number of staff cases of COVID, so that was tough as well."

Last fall, when cases in the second wave began to increase at an alarming rate, Ms. Krystal was one of three CEOs of York Region hospitals who issued a statement to the Provincial Government sounding alarm bells over capacity.

This was before stay-at-home orders and a Provincial shutdown were announced effective Boxing Day, but the challenge was just getting ready to hit a new level.

January was a "very, very busy month" at Southlake, seeing a high of 74 COVID-admitted patients in the hospital at one time.

Now that these orders are lifted, however, concerns remain on the table.

"We are concerned about the variants and we continue to monitor the situation closely," says Ms. Krystal. "Right now (Thursday,

February 18) with COVID, we have about 24 patients of COVID in our hospital, four of those are in the Intensive Care Unit and all of those are ventilated. That is certainly lower than it has been, thankfully, however capacity remains a big challenge at Southlake.

?During the first wave, the biggest issues we really had to deal with were fear of the unknown and fear of not having enough PPE, and really hoping to educate people on what COVID is and what it isn't. The impact on the community was actually the community did not come and seek care when they should have sought care. Our Emergency, as well as several GTA Emergencies, were less busy during Wave One and naturally, because of people's fear. We don't have any specific stats on it, but we did see more patients that were in a more advanced stage, for example, of having a heart attack or waited until symptoms of cancer had presented themselves before they came to Emergency. That is less of an issue in Wave Two.

?During Wave Two, I think dealing with the fatigue of people has been the biggest lesson. It has really been about trying to do what we can to support the health and wellbeing of our staff and physicians. People are generally doing a very good job staying safe. The cases have come down and that has given us a bit of breathing space right now. I can't thank them enough for that, but I need them to continue. Whether or not York Region goes into the Red Zone or stays in the Grey Zone, continuing to follow the public health guidance of not having gatherings at home, not having close contact with people outside your household is so important to this. If the variant gets out of control and we're into Wave Three, that is going to be a pretty demoralizing situation for our folks. They're tired and they need a break.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter