

Final from Communications – October 27, 2009

I'd like to extend my sympathy to the family of the 13-year old and to the family and friends of the child who passed away in eastern Ontario. I can only imagine how difficult these losses must be for them.

As for the provincial situation, the second wave of H1N1 flu is most definitely upon us. Influenza activity is up quite significantly. It's only the end of October and we're already seeing numbers that we usually experience at the peak of flu season. The number of cases will likely increase as the season progresses. This is not unexpected and mirrors the experience of countries in the southern hemisphere, like Australia which had a worse than usual flu season.

While the H1N1 flu affects young people more, the majority mostly experience a low rate of complications. However, unfortunately, a small number do die.

Yesterday, local public health units started immunizing the priority groups – those people who have higher rates of complications from H1N1 flu and health care workers.

We want to continue to focus on these groups. I encourage persons in these groups to come forward for their immunizations.

These groups are:

- People under 65 with chronic conditions;
- Pregnant women;
- Healthy children 6 months to under five years of age;
- People living in remote or isolated communities;
- Health care workers; and
- Household contacts and care providers of persons at high risk who cannot be immunized or may not respond to vaccines.

Assuming that we have enough vaccine we will begin to broaden our immunization program to others in Ontario next week. I really want to encourage parents to get their school age children vaccinated against the H1N1 flu.

In fact, I would strongly urge all Ontarians to get the flu shot. Not only will it protect you and your family from getting the flu, but it will also reduce transmission of the disease in the community.

People should contact their local public health units about immunizations clinics in their communities.

Despite the fact that school age children are more susceptible to this flu, we are not recommending school closures for several reasons. First, H1N1 flu is community acquired disease. Second, school closures have not been shown to be effective. Third, young people tend to congregate in groups outside of school anyway and the risk of transmission would remain high. Finally, schools can encourage good infection control practices within classroom settings.

For people who are concerned about their health, there is now a self-assessment tool on the ministry's website that helps people decide whether they have flu symptoms. These symptoms include a high fever, shortness of breath, body aches, chills, a cough and sore throat.

I would discourage people from simply going to the nearest emergency room. Use the self-assessment tool to decide whether you need to see a health care professional.

Once again let me repeat: we have a safe vaccine that provides effective protection against the H1N1 flu. Every Ontarian should find out from their local public health unit when and where their immunization clinics are held, roll up their sleeve and get the H1N1 flu shot.

Thank you.