

New Tecumseth passes Bradford West Gwillimbury in COVID-19 cases

New Tecumseth recently exceeded the total number of COVID-19 cases recorded in Bradford West Gwillimbury, which had a significant lead on the municipality just a few months ago.

As New Tecumseth approaches 300 total cases, with 40 active at press time, local health authorities notes that municipalities in close proximity to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) see higher levels of transmission than those who are further away.

"The majority of our cases are occurring not just in Simcoe County but in the southern portion of Simcoe County and in Barrie," noted Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Charles Gardner.

"We're definitely seeing that proximity to the GTA is a factor here. In many instances, people work out of district, to the south of here, where there's a much higher incidence of cases. That, too, is a risk factor for the transmission that we're seeing."

A shift in age pattern is also being noted, as the first wave saw the average age of cases around 50, whereas September's average age was 33.

With more long-term care outbreaks in October, the average age rose to 44, which is of concern because age often determines the severity of the virus.

"It's certainly of concern to me that we're starting to see quite an increase in the average age of cases," said Dr. Gardner.

There are currently eight people hospitalized because of COVID-19 in Simcoe Muskoka out of the 150 people with active infections, while the cumulative total of cases is inching towards 1,600.

Royal Victoria Regional Health Centre (RVH) has a Pandemic Response Unit and can accommodate roughly 50 cases of COVID-19, but Dr. Gardner noted the district would be more challenged with regards to ICU and ventilator beds.

Currently, ICU-ventilator bed occupancy is low in Simcoe Muskoka at 34.6 per cent.

The region has 13 active COVID-19 outbreaks related to workplaces, education settings and institutions, so Dr. Gardner said it's important for employees and employers to maintain infection control practices.

Bradford District High School has an ongoing outbreak that started late last month, involving one class and impacting three students. All of the students in the class are in isolation now and receiving COVID-19 testing.

Hillcrest Public School in Barrie has also seen an outbreak, beginning November 2, impacting two students, who are now at home self-isolating.

All of the outbreaks in Simcoe Muskoka have not had teachers as cases, according to Dr. Gardner.

For a school to shut down, he said, there needs to be evidence that the outbreak is out of control, meaning widespread transmission throughout the school.

"If we get that kind of pattern then we would be looking to either close a school for a period of time or if we can identify a section of the school affected, close that section," Dr. Gardner explained.

"Our concern is for the potential of transmission on site ? a link between the cases."

Dr. Gardner said he recommends that parents use the Province's COVID-19 screening tool on their children before school each day to ensure they're not infected, which can be accessed at: covid-19.ontario.ca/self-assessment.

He added that its important for everybody to do their part in stopping the spread of COVID-19 by practicing good hand hygiene, wearing a mask, physically distancing and self monitoring for symptoms.

"If we implement all of that we can gain control of this pandemic again, flatten the curve, and bring it back down,?" said Dr. Gardner.

By Sam OdrowskiLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter