

## Simcoe-Muskoka Health Unit concerned about COVID-19 variant

By Brian Lockhart Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The Simcoe-Muskoka Health Unit is concerned a new variant of the COVID-19 virus could spread through the community after samples from a Barrie long-term care home, Roberta Place, have been identified as a variant that originated in the United Kingdom.

The Health Unit confirmed on Saturday, January 23, that tests performed on one staff member and five residents were positive for the UK variant of the virus.

The variant is considered to be easily transmitted between individuals.

Previously the Health Unit confirmed that preliminary laboratory testing indicated a likelihood of the COVID-19 variant. A second test confirmed it was, in fact, the variant of the virus.

Genome sequencing identified the UK B.1.1.7 variant in six swabs taken from the facility.

"Confirmation of the variant, while expected, does not change our course of action," said Charles Gardner, Medical Officer of Health for the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit. "This variant has proven to be highly infectious. We are doing all we can do to contain this variant to the site and not allow it to spread into the community," adding there is a serious risk and "on the edge" of this variant spreading beyond the long-term care home and into the community.

It was first announced that there was an outbreak at Roberta Place long-term on January 8. On Friday, January 22, 124 residents and 84 staff tested positive for the virus resulting in 32 deaths.

The source of the new infection is not clear, however, the first positive case was a staff member who had close contact with someone who had recently travelled, although that traveller had not been to the U.K. and that the person had made efforts to quarantine and no quarantine rules were broken.

Residents and staff at Simcoe-Muskoka long-term care and retirement homes have already started receiving the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

An initial dose of the vaccine does offer protection, and a second dose is recommended for optimal protection.

As of Tuesday, January 26, New Tecumseth has seen a total of 711 cases of COVID-19, 559 of which have now been marked as recovered by the SMDHU. 15 residents have succumbed to the virus.

New Tecumseth has seen 32 new cases of the virus between January 20 and January 26, the majority of which "26" are attributed to close contact or community transmission.

A new outbreak has been reported at Alliston's Kingsmere Retirement Residence, with three staff members testing positive, according to Dr. Gardner on Tuesday afternoon. Testing of residents continues to take place this week, he added.

With files from Brock Weir