



Op/Ed Submission

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Interior Health tackling COVID-19, then and now

By Susan Brown, President and CEO, Interior Health

The past seven months reflect some of most turbulent times our country has seen, so if you are feeling anxious and confused, I understand.

The COVID-19 picture today is much clearer than it was when B.C. declared its first case on Jan. 28, 2020. That solid plan we all craved then has come into place and we are entering the next phase of the pandemic armed with increased knowledge and medical expertise about COVID-19.

It is nothing short of remarkable to look back to Feb. 14 when Interior Health recorded its first case of COVID-19. Our area of the province acted, we sacrificed, we kept our hospital admissions low, and our case counts down.

We have, tragically, had two deaths in the Interior Health region from COVID-19 and we know that no matter how low our numbers the impact is significant, especially for families who have lost loved ones. These losses are reason enough for all of us to continue to follow the safety precautions every day.

Our public health teams have dealt with a diverse range of COVID-19 cases and outbreaks since March.

We managed B.C.'s first outbreak of COVID-19 in a group of temporary foreign workers at an agricultural business. Later, illness at a South Okanagan farm was another example of excellent work as the spread was contained to the farm itself with only four people testing positive.

The same infection control measures and contact tracing went into high gear when outbreaks were declared at two long-term care sites. Swift action and teamwork resulted in only one person testing positive at each site and no residents becoming ill.

Similarly, outbreaks at the Okanagan Correctional Centre were kept to low numbers. In the second outbreak, declared over on Sept. 10, no inmates became ill.

Our contact tracers have worked tirelessly to reach anyone exposed to the almost 500 people in the Interior who have tested positive for COVID-19 since February. The efforts of our medical health officers, epidemiologists, environmental health, communicable disease and public health staff – all working together – are how we were able to bend the curve back in Kelowna after the July long weekend when a cluster of cases grew from a series of parties.



As CEO, I am proud of our teams, including the staff and physicians at COVID-19 testing sites, in hospitals, in the community, in long-term care, housekeeping, and assisted living facilities, in our labs, in our pharmacies and behind the scenes across all departments.

But – our success to date is not something health-care workers can do alone: we need you. In fact, we are counting on you to continue with the valiant efforts you have all shown to date.

None of the achievements listed above would have been possible without the outstanding commitment from the people who live in the Interior Health region. You stepped up. You washed your hands vigorously, you stayed close to home when you were asked not to travel, you are staying home now when feel ill, and you have maintained appropriate physical distance from others and have chosen to wear masks as an added precaution. These measures must continue in the months ahead.

Now, we're re-starting our fall routines, including back-to-school.

We are watching this important and necessary step carefully. Our public health teams are ready to jump into action to support the school community and our children. Our medical health officers are working with school districts to answer questions from families and students and ease their fears.

While COVID-19 is new, dealing with communicable diseases such as meningitis and measles in schools is not. This is the role of public health and something we do very well.

We are also prepared at our testing facilities and have strengthened our IH lab capacity. More people have been trained and we're ready to ramp up testing if required.

In some communities test results took longer than I wanted to see, so over the summer we focused our efforts on training more lab staff and stocking supplies to streamline testing. Today when you look at the B.C. Centre for Disease Control data page, Interior Health test results are typically a day or less.

As we head into the fall, we are urging everyone to keep their bubbles small. The precautions that help protect our long term care homes can be applied to schools. Together, fewer contacts and smaller bubbles will help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and its introduction to schools.

Our public health teams are equipped to follow up on COVID-19 cases, our primary care and hospital staff and physicians have the latest information on how to treat the illness, but none of us can stop the transmission of the disease alone. We need you.

I appeal to you to not be complacent and to continue to follow the safety precautions that we know works in stopping communicable diseases, including COVID-19. Stay home when you're sick, maintain physical distancing, wash your hands frequently and keep your bubbles small.

We can do this together. Let's renew and refocus our efforts to control this virus, to protect ourselves and loved ones from COVID-19.