

The Honourable Tyler Shandro
Premier of Alberta
307 Legislature Building
10800 97 Avenue
Edmonton AB T5K 2B6

February 3, 2021

EZMSA Office
Suite 201 12315 Stony Plain Road NW
Edmonton, AB
T5N 3Y8

Dear Minister Shandro:

Re: Serious Concerns Regarding Relaxation of Current Public Health Restrictions

The Strategic COVID-19 Pandemic Committee of the Edmonton Zone Medical Staff Association has serious concerns regarding the currently planned staged reductions of public health restrictions announced by Alberta Health (AH) on Friday, January 29th. These concerns are increased by the arrival of the B117 and B1351 coronavirus variants in the province.

Thank You to Albertans

Recently we have seen short-term reductions in new COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations in the Edmonton Zone and Alberta. The restrictions announced in December have greatly reduced the daily number of active cases from a peak on December 12, 2020, by approximately 60% as of January 27, 2021, in the Edmonton Zone. The Edmonton Zone Medical Staff welcome this progress and we are grateful to the people of the Edmonton Zone and all Albertans for the good choices they have made as individuals, families, business owners, employees, and people of faith. We also recognize the success of the restrictions announced in December by the government.

Higher Transmissible and Fatal Variants

However, we believe the announced staged reduction in restrictions is premature and highly risky. As stated at the AH press conference on January 26th, the new variant COVID-19 strains in Alberta are dramatically more transmissible. AH's modelling demonstrated how their increased transmissibility can displace the original strain of the virus and greatly increase the number of COVID-19 cases. The model showed the new variants could reach 10,000 new cases daily and in



excess of 3,500 hospitalizations within only eight weeks. In supporting the reliability of the model, we note that in many countries where the variant strains have become established, particularly the U.K. and Ireland, the variant has rapidly become the dominant strain and caused an explosive increase in new cases. Other models also indicate that if the variants become dominant, **significant increases in cases, hospitalizations, and deaths could occur in Alberta even with the current restrictions in place.**

Lack of Vaccine Supply

The recently announced delays in the arrival of scheduled doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines will further postpone immunization of high-risk groups. It is also clear that the immunization of Albertans will not occur rapidly enough to slow transmission. We will need to rely on continued restrictions, with robust contact tracing, enhanced genomic sequencing, isolation, and quarantining, to manage the spread of this virus for the foreseeable future.

Premature to Relax the Current Restrictions

We recommended in our previous correspondence on January 15th that the staged reduction in restrictions should **begin by relaxing restrictions that positively benefit physical, mental, emotional, and social health and have low probability of increasing community transmission** (e.g., easing restrictions to allow safe contact with socially isolated seniors and persons who are housebound). See the attached previous correspondence. This principle is even more important to be observed until there is more information on the prevalence and impact of the new variant coronavirus strains.

Issues with the Four Stages of Restrictions

We strongly disagree with the January 29th proposed four stages for relaxation of COVID-19 public health restrictions because they are inconsistent with our recommendations.

Stage 1 proposes to reopen restaurants and gyms, venues that have already been associated with major outbreaks. We are also concerned by a failure to relax the restrictions that are most requested by our patients. As physicians, by far the most common request we hear is to allow visits in homes with best friends, grandchildren, and trusted neighbors. A small thoughtful and cautious change in the restrictions to allow this would have a major positive effect on the mental, spiritual, and emotional health of most of our patients, with a very slight risk of increasing transmission.

The proposed changes in Stages 2-4 are alarming. The inclusion of activities that are almost certain to cause super-spreader events such as attending conferences, casinos, and sporting events is impossible to reconcile with a careful and cautious approach meant to protect Albertans. Allowing sports events and concert attendance by April 12th in Stage 4 is especially alarming. Allowing super-spreader events when COVID-19 will still be circulating, the percentage of new variants is likely to be increasing, immunizations will not have achieved herd immunity, and 150 Albertans will still be hospitalized is very bad policy. Even in the Maritime bubble, Nova Scotia currently allows a maximum of 60 spectators, and they have much lower rates than we have had for a much

longer time. Stages 2-4 are more appropriately scheduled for when we have achieved rates as low and long as the bubble or a significant portion of the population is immunized.

Enforcing Public Health Restrictions

Finally, we are concerned at the current lack of enforcement of public health restrictions related to large gatherings at church services and recommencement of in-restaurant service. The failure to enforce these restrictions further erodes the moral authority of the government to impose restrictions because it creates a double-standard between those who are following the restrictions and those who violate them with impunity. This is especially unfair in that those that violate the restrictions profit from their law breaking while the law abiding suffer.

We continue to support our January 15th letter recommendations (at least until sufficient immunization occurs) with confidence that avoidance of a third wave of COVID-19 cases, which could dwarf the previous spring and winter waves, is the best way to reduce the health and economic impacts of the virus, while immunization of the population continues.

Sincerely,



Dr. James Talbot



Dr. Noel Gibney
Co-Chairs Strategic COVID-19 Pandemic Committee
Edmonton Zone Medical Staff Association

CC: Lorna Rosen, Deputy Minister, Alberta Health
Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Chief Medical Officer of Health, Alberta Health
Dr. Verna Yiu, President & CEO, Alberta Health Services
Dr. Christopher Sikora, Medical Officer of Health, Alberta Health Services
Dr. Paul Boucher, President, Alberta Medical Association
Dr. Erika MacIntyre, President, Edmonton Zone Medical Staff Association

Attachment:

EZMSA Letter- Expiration of Current Public Health Restrictions on January 21, 2021