

Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough County-City Health Unit

Tuesday, December 8, 2015

Hope Shines Brightly for Public Health in 2016

As 2015 draws to a close, it's hard not to be filled with anticipation over what this year's holiday season may herald. The winter solstice marks a turning point in the earth's journey around the sun, and anchors many of our most cherished religious and cultural traditions, be they Christmas, Chanukah or Kwanza. At this darkest time of year, we yearn for signs of hope and light to brighten our way. I find myself filled with rekindled hope, despite the darkness.

Full disclosure: I am married to the current board chair of the New Canadian Centre (NCC). That said, I am delighted that the NCC has reminded Peterborough of our proud history of receiving and resettling refugees. In 1825, the city's founder, Peter Robinson brought 2,000 impoverished and dispossessed Irish tenant farmers to the area. In these dying weeks of 2015, Canadians are preparing to welcome a few thousand Syrians, made homeless by war and terror. A small trickle of privately sponsored families will begin to make their way to Peterborough this month. In the meantime, a taskforce has come together to plan for larger numbers in 2016. Public health will most definitely play a role in welcoming our Syrian newcomers with access to dental care for children and immunizations, and it has been heartening to see how quickly and eagerly the rest of our healthcare partners have joined together to ensure that urgent medical and mental health needs of arriving refugees will be met.

A bright star has risen in the dark winter skies over Paris and made its way here. That star is the hope that the world has finally agreed to work together to limit greenhouse gas emissions and reduce the rate of global warming. Finally, we are emerging from global denial to deal with the greatest public health problem facing the planet and threatening future generations. As we go to press, talks continue in Paris and here at home. Both federally and in Ontario, our Ministries of Environment have now added Climate Change added to their title and mandate. And in Peterborough, municipalities are engaged in developing climate change action plans. There is growing momentum that will carry over into the new year.

The holidays are a time for family and friends to gather, and along with the invited guests, we can also anticipate that nasty viruses will arrive on our door steps. For the past two years, Peterborough's annual influenza epidemic peaked during the holidays, seriously straining the local healthcare system. I am glad to share that this year, we will be better prepared!

First of all, immunization remains the best way to prevent the flu. Thanks to newer vaccines like Flumist, a nasal spray recommended for children, and to the convenience of pharmacy access, we should be well prepared this season. In addition, the hospital, family health teams, CCAC and public health started early this year to put plans in place to deal with a possible holiday surge in illnesses. Our family doctors and nurses have stepped up their staffing of after hour clinics. You will be reminded to call your family doctor first if you think you need medical attention. The hospital has a ward of emergency beds ready to

be filled and staffed if needed. Public health and long term care homes will collaborate to move patients more seamlessly from residence to hospital and back during an outbreak, if possible. And now, we wait.

This has been the year of new beginnings for public health here in Peterborough – we've moved downtown to a great new location. Our Board of Health is fundraising to build a community kitchen at our new site at Jackson Square. We may emerge from a recent community consultation with a new name and a new look. When I look to horizons both near and far, so many stars are twinkling bright!

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