

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

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Let's Make it Easier to Walk in Our Winter Wonderland

Pedestrians in Peterborough County and City have had a bonus this winter – up until the end of December, we all enjoyed clear sidewalks and paths. But that has changed, with winter's first storm transforming the landscape into a dangerous and inhospitable world for walkers. Many thoughts raced through my head as I made my way to work recently: How are pedestrians, parents with strollers, school bound children and elderly or mobility-impaired residents going to manage? Without risking turning this column into a Rick Mercer rant, imagine my chagrin to discover that while sidewalks threatened life and limb, parking lots lay at the ready, plowed and sanded and awaiting their four-wheeled guests! Dear readers, it is time we embraced our geography and stopped hoping that global warming would take care of our snow and ice. We can all play a role in helping to keep our communities walkable around the year.

"Build it and they will come!" – it seems to me that we still need some convincing to believe this old adage to ring true when it pertains to the creation and maintenance of a system of sidewalks, trails and paths that are meant to remain open, safe and inviting all year round! Seniors can be forgiven for scurrying south for the winter – why face weeks and months of being either housebound or fearful of falling and ending up in the emergency department, or even worse, the morgue? This is not an option for most of us who endure, and surprisingly, may even enjoy physical activity outdoors all year round, powered either by our own two feet or perhaps a walker, wheelchair or scooter. And we all know that supporting active commuting and physical activity is important to public health.

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) requires that municipalities have multi-year accessibility plans that contain procedures and policies addressing the maintenance of public infrastructure and public spaces such as sidewalks. Specifically, the Act requires the prompt clearing of snow along accessible routes intended for winter use, including sidewalks, pathways and trails. In 2012, Hamilton released its "pedestrian mobility" plan with the explicit goal to apply an evidence-based approach to transform the pedestrian environment into one that supports a culture of walking for all residents, regardless of ability or age.

Many Ontario municipalities have by-laws that require able bodied home and property owners to clear their sidewalks within 24 hours of a snowfall. Perhaps it is time for Peterborough area councils to consider this change in responsibility? By-laws requiring the property owner to both clear the sidewalk and refrain from dumping snow onto walks and roads must be a challenge to implement and enforce. And they may not be popular. They must be supplemented with community snow removal service for low income and elderly home owners who require assistance and don't have neighbours and family to call on. For municipalities like Brampton, Mississauga and Toronto, these services have spawned seasonal local employment opportunities serving vulnerable populations. But snow removal on sidewalks and paths needs to become as much of a priority as the clearing of arterial roads and property owners can play a role to ensure it gets done. Happily, the city of Peterborough has put more money

into its 2016 budget for winter maintenance of sidewalks. This should help improve the timeliness of snow removal from sidewalks and trails to improve access and help prevent icy conditions. Rural townships like Selwyn have purchased more snow removal equipment in order to improve snow removal in Lakefield and Bridgenorth. Even the smallest town or hamlet can make its sidewalks and trails inviting for rural residents who may have no safe place to walk in the winter. We can sit inside and sing about “Walking in a Winter Wonderland” or we can actually make it a reality. I love the song – but prefer the latter!