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May 4, 2022

Dr. Kieran Michael Moore, MD, CCFP(EM), FCFP, MPH, DTM&H, FRCPC, FCAHS  
Chief Medical Officer of Health, Ontario

Dear Dr. Moore,

We are writing today to commend you for your leadership last week to exercise your powers under section 77.1 of the *Health Protection & Promotion Act* to issue a province-wide section 22 order to continue mask requirements in several high-risk settings. We think this was absolutely the right decision.

We are also writing to you today to recommend that you build on this action. Specifically, to temporarily broaden the mask requirements in Ontario to include indoor public spaces such as workplaces, schools, college and universities, as well as essential service settings (such as grocery stores and pharmacies). To be fully effective and clear in communication to Ontarians we believe this is needed at a provincial, not a local level. Like you, we had hoped that as masking and other protections ceased to be requirements, that we would be able to get through this wave without much suffering or long-term disruption. Unfortunately, this does not seem to have played out as we had hoped.

The Ontario Science Table has reported persistently high amounts of COVID-19 in the wastewater, as a key marker of transmission. Consistent with this, in each of our respective health units, we continue to see significant impacts that are not relenting. In Peterborough Public Health region, we see hospitalizations of persons with COVID-19 recently exceeding any previous wave. In Niagara, for the past 3 weeks, hospitalizations have remained equivalent to the peaks of wave two and three, requiring our main hospital system to ramp down surgeries to 70%. On Monday this week, our overstretched hospital systems had 100 patients admitted, but without a bed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly had a disproportionate impact on the individuals and communities with the worst social determinants of health. The current persistently high transmission of COVID-19 is exacerbating inequalities in our society. This subjects those with inequities to more infections, more hospitalizations, more isolation from work and school, more lost income due to isolation, and more risk of long-term disability with Post-Acute COVID Syndrome (aka Long COVID).

Masks can help mitigate this suffering and exacerbation of health inequities. The US CDC has reported masking, with an N95 or equivalent, may provide protection to an 83% reduction in odds of infection. This provides similar reduction in infection to what vaccines had pre-Omicron. Furthermore, evidence synthesized by PHO has identified no evidence of harms with masking. We believe this evidence should receive consideration.

The return of masking could help protect those with inequities and vulnerabilities, relieve the pressures on our hospitals, and most importantly protect the health of the people we serve.

Respectfully,

*Dr. M. Mustafa Hirji, Medical Officer of Health & Commissioner (Acting), Niagara Region Public Health & Emergency Services*

*Dr. Shanker Nesathurai, Acting Medical Officer of Health, Windsor-Essex County Health Unit*

*Dr. Thomas Piggott, Medical Officer of Health and CEO, Peterborough Public Health*