

A new public health mandate ... means?

By: Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Peterborough Public Health

It's a brand new year, and Ontario has unveiled a brand new mandate for its local public health sector.

Starting January 1, Peterborough Public Health began operating under a new legislated set of criteria and standards that changes the types of services and programs we deliver to our communities in some fundamental ways.

First of all, our mandate has been strengthened to work with other partners to address, report upon and prevent the health inequities that arise from unequal access to the social

determinants of health, such as income, housing, education, early childhood experiences, racism and discrimination.

Also included in our new health equity mandate is the requirement for all Ontario boards of health to build relationships with First Nations communities within their geographic area. Fortunately, Peterborough did this over ten years ago – in fact, it was one of the reasons I was drawn to work for this board of health.

Woven throughout all of the new program requirements is a stronger emphasis on accountability and public disclosure. We will be setting meaningful local targets to measure the impact of our work and monitor our progress – and these will be shared with our partners and stakeholders. As will all of our inspection reports on food premises, water systems, recreational water facilities, and investigations of infection control breeches. This will soon be on a brand new website that will make it easier to find relevant inspection results.

Public health will no longer retain explicit responsibility for services such as prenatal education, travel health advice, smoking cessation and cancer screening promotion and so there will be changes coming there. Already, in Peterborough, there is a new and active collaboration of local health care providers determined to create a more seamless and robust system of smoking cessation services so that all smokers can find proven supports when they are ready to quit. Our travel clinic has been a treasured resource by many in our community and we are now piloting a cost-recovery model that would allow us to continue to offer these services. Our cancer prevention efforts will move away from promoting screening for cervical, breast and colon cancers to a focus on preventing commercial tobacco use, promoting sun safety and preventing exposures to radon gas, as these constitute the greatest risks to our populations.

Looking beyond the health care system, the new standards have mandated a stronger relationship with boards of

education to ensure that school-aged children are prioritized for health protection efforts like immunization and dental screening. Students will also benefit from a beefed-up health promotion agenda that includes mental health promotion, vision screening and the provision of preventive oral health services like fluoride varnishes and sealants. Many details of the new school program have yet to be released by the province, but we have been advised that these changes will be fully implemented by the beginning of the next school year in September.

Speaking of young people, as of January 1, Ontario's OHIP Plus program has made many contraceptives available, free of charge, to all young women up to the age of 24 years. We are currently transitioning many of our sexual health clients over to local pharmacies. However, we will continue to offer a broad range of low-cost contraception, in addition to confidential testing and treatment of sexually transmitted infections at our sexual health clinic.

The last word goes to climate change: probably the biggest threat to our collective well-being. You'll see more from public health on this issue going forward, a welcomed emphasis for us on behalf of future generations. All said, this latest update will ensure that public health continues to contribute to meaningful change and better health outcomes.



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