

On the Provincial Election



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With a provincial election in the air, no doubt health care funding will get loads of that air time. That's not the case

for public health: it usually takes a crisis like SARS or Walkerton to grab the public's attention and propel us onto the political radar screen. In this short window of pre-election political hyper-awareness, being an advocate for upstream public health approaches that may take decades to produce results can be a lonely calling. Local boards of health across this province will be reminding the public of the importance of this approach across the many issues that face us. So hopefully, it won't be surprising to see local public health collaborating in a nonpartisan way to promote civic engagement by encouraging all eligible voters to be well-informed before casting their ballots on June 7.

I can understand why preventing bad things from happening can be a tad abstract or remote. But prevention can make a lot of sense, even during an election. Public health proponents would advocate for an increase in household incomes, using strategies like a higher minimum wage or a guaranteed basic income, so that food insecurity, currently at 16.5% of Peterborough households, could be eliminated, or at least significantly diminished. There is scientific evidence that shows how ending both poverty and the growing socio-economic disparity in such a wealthy and prosperous province as ours would reap public health benefits for all.

I have great admiration for the women and men who dedicate their lives to become elected politicians and encourage everyone to extend to them, the same esteem and respect directed to community volunteers. Hopefully all elected officials will come to understand that tobacco, alcohol, poor nutrition and sedentary lifestyles are the four big risk factors for much of the preventable illness and premature deaths in Ontario. Provincial governments can use their policy levers and resource investments to shape the environments that can reduce risks and promote healthier human behaviours. Increasing the minimum age for tobacco, cannabis and alcohol to 21 years and introducing more restrictions on the marketing and sales of alcohol may not sound like popular moves, but they deserve consideration. Delaying the initiation of substance use reduces the likelihood of habitual use, as well as addiction. It would reduce the associated substance-related injuries, reduce the number of people killed or maimed in motor vehicle collisions, and help protect developing



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brains just a little longer (25 years would be even better for cannabis). Ontario has the second lowest retail price of cigarettes in Canada, also coming in below the World Health Organization recommended level of taxation. Increasing taxes on tobacco and limiting the marketing of alcohol would contribute to reduced rates of use. The "sweet spot" for all these substances requires a fine balance of regulation as well as protection from commercialization.

It is impossible to do justice to such an important event as a provincial election in a short column. I haven't even begun to share my thrill over the latest air quality report that shows Ontario's air is cleaner than it was ten years ago, thanks in most part to shutting down coal-generated electricity. I'm sure that in the coming weeks, our media partners will do their best to highlight the election issues that matter.

Check out our website at peterboroughpublichealth.ca for more public health perspectives and credible information sources to help you get informed so you can cast your ballot for a healthier Peterborough!



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