

British Columbia health authorities concealed COVID-19 hospital outbreaks that killed dozens

Alexandra Greene
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A months-long investigation carried out by CTV News has revealed that information about COVID-19 outbreaks in the hospitals of British Columbia's Lower Mainland has been concealed from the public and hidden from journalists investigating the matter.

Since the start of the pandemic, COVID-19 outbreaks have occurred in numerous hospitals in the province's Lower Mainland. Practically every hospital in Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley has been subject to at least one outbreak, and dozens of patients have died. In all, hundreds of hospital staff and patients alike have been infected.

One of the deadliest outbreaks was at Burnaby General Hospital in late 2020, which infected over 100 people and killed 12. At Surrey Memorial Hospital, an outbreak that lasted from November 2020 to February 2021 resulted in 125 infections and 13 deaths. Last May, an outbreak at Lion's Gate Hospital in North Vancouver infected 52 people and claimed the lives of 16. It was the third outbreak at that location since the pandemic began.

Journalists have attempted to access the post-outbreak findings, only to be ignored, avoided and shut out by provincial health authorities. Information has been withheld and the disclosure of documents denied. Government officials have repeatedly insisted that the sought-after documentation is simply non-existent—despite the fact that many lives were lost.

After fighting a freedom of information (FOI) request for several months, BC's Fraser Health Authority finally provided 79 pages of written documentation about the outbreaks in its hospitals to CTV News Vancouver journalist Penny Daflos. Of these, 55 pages were redacted. Every page that Daflos received was marked as confidential.

The outbreaks with the greatest number of fatalities took place in hospitals in Vancouver Coastal Health's (VCH) jurisdiction. Yet VCH privacy officers have stated that there was no documentation to be provided under the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act. Daflos was told that the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) does not require health authorities to produce an investigative report following an outbreak.

Fraser Health cited three sections of the Information and Privacy Act in their redactions, notably section 13—"information that would reveal advice or recommendations developed by or for a public body or a minister"—and section 17—"disclosure harmful to the financial or economic interests of a public body."

The Fraser Health information that is legible shows common issues that allowed the virus to spread among patients and staff during outbreaks at Abbotsford Regional Hospital, Burnaby General, Delta Hospital and Surrey Memorial Hospital.

The documents note that outbreaks were attributable to staff who were working while infectious, a lack of adherence to proper personal protective equipment (PPE) rules, lax social distancing measures and mask-wearing outside of patient treatment areas, and patients being moved between units while unknowingly infected with the virus. Clutter and hygiene problems were also listed as a factor.

Many of the reports state, largely in line with the BC New Democratic Party government's refusal to acknowledge that COVID-19 is transmitted by aerosols, that, "Transmission may have occurred through direct contact between cases or through contact with a contaminated environment."

Most of the reports state that it "cannot be determined" whether infected health care workers contracted COVID-19 in outbreak units or elsewhere, or "in what direction transmission occurred (patient-to-staff, staff-to-patient, staff-to-staff)."

The revelations have called into question why, supposedly, no formal documentation was maintained about the outbreaks despite their high death tolls, and how thorough the investigations conducted in the aftermath actually were.

It is known, for example, that infection control specialists who investigated the documented outbreaks did not test everybody in the affected hospitals. Instead, symptom screening took place and random individuals were spot-tested.

The CTV article detailing the struggle to obtain the small amount of information that Daflos did acquire was published on October 14.

Just four days later, in the provincial legislature, BC Minister of Citizens' Services Lisa Beare, a member of the NDP,

introduced Bill 22, an amendment to the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act that would allow the government to impose fees on people filing FOI requests. The changes to the act would also see the BC premier's office become exempt from citizens' information requests.

BC's Information and Privacy commissioner Michael McEvoy denounced the NDP's proposal, stating that imposing any FOI request fee would be "a significant step in the wrong direction."

The information provided by the provincial health authorities is so lacking that residents of the province have decided to start and maintain social media pages and accounts that give the public a greater awareness of the risks that they face from COVID-19.

BC School Covid Tracker is one such example, an initiative created and maintained by residents of the province who use information submitted by COVID-positive individuals or know of an outbreak that the BC government is not making the public adequately aware of.

This is usually the case with school outbreaks, which are typically just listed by the health authority as "exposures." Health authorities use this vague term so as to avoid providing details on how many people were infected in each outbreak.

With BC residents relying on unofficial ad hoc sources to protect themselves and their families, it is all the more vital that information be wholly accessible to those who request it.

"We are living in a time when people are seeking more answers, and greater accountability, from public bodies and their governments, amplifying the significant role that freedom of information plays in allowing people to get information about what their governments are doing, and the decisions that affect them," McEvoy said.

It is unsurprising that the BC NDP is attempting to obstruct the public's ability to access information on public bodies like school boards, health authorities, provincial Crown corporations and municipal governments.

The NDP would undoubtedly prefer to smother efforts to uncover more information about its criminal actions throughout the pandemic and the consequences of its safeguarding of corporate profits instead of human life.

Mario Possamai, a pandemic planning expert, forensic investigator and senior adviser to Ontario's Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) commission, recently urged BC premier John Horgan to immediately initiate a public inquiry into BC's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Possamai said that an inquiry is needed urgently so that more effective measures can be adopted to bring the fourth wave under control and handle future waves better.

In 2003, Possamai told CTV, British Columbia's handling of the SARS outbreak was "the best in the world." At that time, BC health officials recognized the airborne spread of the virus and immediately adopted measures to stop SARS from spreading in the province.

With COVID-19, the opposite response has taken place. For the duration of the pandemic, Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry has spent her press conferences sidestepping questions from reporters about aerosol spread. Public health precautions have been virtually entirely based on droplet-oriented protections. The disastrous consequences of these unscientific policies are reflected in the viral spread in hospitals and the ravaging of BC's schools by COVID-19.

"Month after month after month, week after week, BC decided not to follow the science and ignore (airborne transmission) and I think it's led to preventable deaths and infections," Possamai explained.

Possamai has also criticized the province for its failure to collect and disclose COVID-19 data. BC has consistently lagged behind other Canadian provinces in its per-capita testing rates, and experts have long called into question the official statistics and case numbers recorded by the province.

Earlier this year, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported on a study published by the Royal Society of Canada that revealed a vast undercount in the nationwide pandemic death toll. Quashed by the corporate media and political establishment, the Royal Society's findings estimate that BC's actual pandemic death rate is almost double what the government has officially reported. "It looks like approximately 78 percent of likely or quite likely COVID-19 deaths in BC were not reported or identified," said study co-author and University of Toronto associate professor, Tara Moriarty, at the time. Moriarty also noted that the numbers were adjusted to account for opioid deaths, which have also climbed steeply during the pandemic.

As of October 22, a total of 2,096 people were officially recorded as having lost their lives to the COVID-19 virus in British Columbia. There were 4,969 active COVID-19 cases in the province. On October 21, the province announced 715 new cases, meaning the total provincial case count passed the 200,000 mark. By this estimate, one in 25 people in BC has tested positive for COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic.

BC has the second-highest number of active cases in the country after Alberta. The fact that a province with a population of just under 4.9 million people has more active infections than Canada's most populous provinces, Ontario and Quebec (which have populations of 14.7 million and 8.4 million respectively), speaks volumes about the NDP's homicidal policies and its complete disregard for the lives and health of the population it governs.



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