Canada's top doctor: Reduce contacts immediately or Omicron will overwhelm hospitals

Roger Jordan
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In the direst warning delivered to date by a public health official in the country, Canada's chief public health officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, stated Monday evening that social contacts must be reduced immediately to avoid hospitals being overwhelmed by cases of COVID-19. Her remarks come as the highly infectious Omicron variant spreads like wildfire across the country, especially in Ontario and Quebec, Canada's two most populous provinces.

"Even if Omicron happens to be milder than the previous virus variants, because it's spreading so rapidly…even a small proportion of people winding up in hospital is going to overwhelm our systems," commented Tam. She added that Omicron is spreading widely in schools, universities, and other education institutions, and beginning to take off in workplaces.

As of 7 p.m. eastern time Wednesday, Canada had recorded 13,460 daily infections, the highest of any day since the pandemic began. The figures did not include cases from British Columbia or the country's three territories, Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut. Wednesday's preliminary figure followed a total of 11,690 cases Tuesday and 10,665 on Monday.

The spectacular surge in infections over the past week has already begun to overwhelm Canada's COVID-19 testing system. Quebec reported 6,361 new cases Wednesday, more than double its peak prior to the emergence of Omicron. The province's test positivity rate is a staggering 13.4 percent, more than double the 5 percent threshold beyond which public health authorities consider infections to be out of control. Some test centres in Montreal report taking up to 10 days to process results, making them all but useless in helping prevent further transmission.

A report released yesterday by Quebec's public health institute estimated that hospitalizations could climb by 100 per day if cases continue to rise.

Underscoring Tam's warning that the central role in spreading Omicron is being played by schools and workplaces, Quebec's official figures show that 37 percent of all outbreaks are linked to schools. A further 11.5 percent are in daycares, and 33 percent are connected to workplaces.

Quebec Premier Francois Legault confirmed at a Wednesday evening press conference that gatherings of up to 10 people will be permitted for the Christmas holiday. As of December 26, private gatherings will be limited to six people from two households. Legault stated that he expects daily cases to jump to 9,000 per day.

The picture is little better in neighbouring Ontario, where 4,383 new infections were reported Wednesday, the highest daily total since April 23. The seven-day rolling average of cases has more than doubled in just a week, standing at 3,520 compared to last Wednesday's 1,514 cases. The test positivity rate was 10.7 percent.

In its daily update, the provincial government reported that it has a backlog of 58,038 tests. Assuming that 10.7 percent of these unprocessed tests are positive, the true number of daily infections was well over 10,000.

Canada's inadequate testing infrastructure, the product of decades of health care austerity budgets supported by all political parties, can no longer give an accurate picture of the extent of the pandemic's spread. As Dr. Peter Juni, scientific director of Ontario's Science Advisory Table, told CBC News, the testing system only detects about 40 percent of infections under "normal" pandemic conditions. With the emergence of Omicron, he believes this figure has dropped to 30 percent. "These numbers will be an undercount, and will become more and more unreliable as case numbers are growing," he added.

In the face of this tsunami of infections, governments at all levels are refusing to take any serious action to prevent the overwhelming of health care systems. Officials claim that it was inevitable or unavoidable that Omicron would overload the country's testing capacity. As Ontario's chief medical officer of health, Dr. Kieran Moore, put it, health authorities now have "laser vision" on hospitalization rates.

Given the fact that hospitalizations are a lagging indicator of the spread of COVID-19, taking several weeks to be recorded, the political establishment is essentially saying that no counter measures will be taken until the health care system collapses. Moreover, they accept as a given that millions of people will get infected with a potentially deadly disease–one, moreover,

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that has been proven to cause serious long-term complications, including brain damage, reduction in cognitive abilities, breathing problems, and other physical impairments, for months and years after infection. This homicidal policy of mass infection has been associated throughout the pandemic with far-right advocates of "herd immunity" and the Great Barrington Declaration.

Those claiming that Omicron's spread was inevitable must take the population for fools. The fact of the matter is that it was allowed to run rampant by the refusal of the federal Trudeau government and its provincial counterparts to adopt any effective containment measures. Even though scientists warned in late November that Omicron is more transmissible and can evade vaccine immunity, and the World Health Organization declared it a variant of concern on November 25, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau failed to address the population for almost three weeks on what his government intended to do. No additional public health measures were introduced, other than a handful of ineffective international travel restrictions, to halt Omicron's spread.

Provincial governments followed suit. Ontario's hard-right premier, Doug Ford, and his Quebec counterpart, Francois Legault, belatedly introduced capacity limits on restaurants, retail outlets, and other facilities last week. But no new restrictions were even talked about in workplaces or schools, with Quebec merely extending the Christmas school holidays by a few days. Tam's comment Monday that education institutions and workplaces are increasingly the main sources of Omicron transmission represents a damning indictment of these reckless policies.

Even now, with an unprecedented health care catastrophe looming, no serious response from governments is forthcoming. Trudeau gave a press conference yesterday with several government ministers to announce a slight loosening of eligibility criteria for workers to claim financial aid from the government. The new rules mean that workers who lose their jobs as a direct result of capacity limits imposed by provincial governments can claim a measly C$300 per week under the Canada Worker Lockdown Benefit. This program, which provides significantly lower levels of support than the poverty-level Canada emergency Response Benefit did during the initial stages of the pandemic, was previously only accessible to workers under a full lockdown for 14 consecutive days.

This token gesture, which will expire as early as February 12, 2022, will do nothing to prevent workers from congregating in packed factories, office buildings, delivery centres, and other workplaces.

The Trudeau government's rejection of any strategy to seriously combat the spread of Omicron is in keeping with its pandemic policy over the past two years, which has been to prioritize the protection of corporate profits over the safeguarding of human lives. Although the Liberal government was briefed extensively on COVID-19 as early as January 2020, it took no action to coordinate a public health response during the first two months of the year. Only on March 10, 2020, did it write to the provinces to collect an inventory of available medical equipment.

It moved much more swiftly on organizing a massive financial bailout for the banks, super-rich shareholders, and big business. With the approval of business lobby groups, the opposition Conservatives and New Democrats, and the trade unions, the Trudeau government transferred more than C$650 billion in public funds to the financial elite in March 2020. It then spearheaded a savage campaign to reopen all areas of the economy and schools following the temporary lockdown measures it was forced to adopt in the spring of 2020 due to protests by workers in auto plants and other industries. The Trudeau government declared that any subsequent measures to combat the pandemic should be "short-term" and implemented at the "local level"—i.e., totally ineffectual to tackle a deadly virus that knows no borders.

The government systematically denied working people the ability to access appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for an airborne virus, such as N95 masks or elastomeric respirators. The Trudeau government continued to deny that aerosols are the primary source of COVID-19 transmission for almost two years.

The COVID-19 crisis now confronting Canada was not some unforeseeable natural disaster, but the product of the ruling elite's criminal mishandling of the pandemic. It points to the urgent necessity of the working class taking matters into its own hands by fighting for a strategy to eliminate COVID-19. This strategy must include the immediate shutdown of all nonessential production and schools, with workers compensated for 100 percent of their wages from the wealth accumulated by the pandemic profiteers. It must also include a vast expansion of testing and contact tracing, the isolation of infected people, the provision of high-quality PPE, and mass vaccination to control the spread of the virus and bring infections down to zero.

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