

Coronavirus Media Availability

January 24, 2020

City Hall Rotunda

Remarks for Dr. Eileen de Villa, Medical Officer of Health

The novel coronavirus has certainly been a topic of much media and public focus in recent days. Before we head into the weekend and as many in our city begin celebrations for the Lunar New Year on Saturday, I thought now would be a good time to share some information and provide an opportunity for questions on what we do as public health to manage infectious diseases and keep our residents safe and healthy.

Firstly, let me start by saying that we are not aware of any confirmed cases of the coronavirus in Canada. This also means that there are currently no confirmed cases in Toronto and that the overall risk to our residents is still considered to be low.

Given that Toronto's Pearson Airport is an international travel hub and because we are expecting increased travel with the upcoming Lunar New Year festivities, I want you to be aware that we are actively monitoring this situation with our provincial and national health

partners. At this time, I want to provide you with some further background and reassurance that the system is well-prepared.

As many of you know, we are currently in the midst of our annual cold and flu season and, as such, I would like to remind everyone of the importance of good infection prevention and control practices to help protect against getting sick and prevent the spread of illness.

These practices include: getting an annual flu vaccine, available from clinics and pharmacies, washing your hands frequently with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, covering your mouth and nose when you sneeze or cough, sneezing or coughing into your sleeve or arm if you don't have a tissue, and, last but not least, staying home if you are sick.

But providing advice on how to prevent the spread of illness is only one small aspect of what public health does to reduce the impact of infectious disease. As public health, we are notified of communicable diseases routinely as they are identified by health care providers and confirmed through lab tests.

When we are notified of instances of communicable disease, it activates the work of a system of skilled public health professionals who work behind the scenes. We begin by following up with the person who is ill to understand the circumstances surrounding their illness, we identify those with whom they have had contact and settings where they may have been during the time when the disease might have been transmitted to others. We do this as part of our work in public health, each and every day -- and while you don't always hear about it, as I often say, in public health, where the focus is on prevention, when it appears that nothing is happening, it means the public health system is working and we are doing our job well.

I think that it is also important to share that when we assess these types of situations and determine that there is a potential health risk to other people, we make sure that those at risk are informed and aware. Sometimes we do this through direct communication with individuals. And at other times we issue public notices and work with the media to make people aware as quickly as possible. We work directly with hospitals, health care providers, schools, daycares and other community partners when these situations arise.

We do this work to make sure that if and when these situations arise people are notified:

- 1/ that they may have been exposed to a potential health risk
- 2/ what signs and symptoms they should look out for
- 3/ and when and what medical treatment should be sought out

We do this to help people protect their health by accessing timely treatment. We also do this to help prevent the spread of infectious diseases in our community.

We share all of the data related to this work with our colleagues at the Ministry of Health and Public Health Ontario using a provincial IT system. We do this so that we can monitor changes in the environment, so that we can evaluate the impact of our public health interventions, and build on our expertise to better inform our work going forward. We know that there is always room for improvement. As public health professionals, we wouldn't be doing our jobs well if we didn't look to identify these opportunities, learn from the past, expand our knowledge and share this information to benefit our health system locally and beyond.

Yesterday, the World Health Organization, the international public health authority, advised that currently the novel coronavirus is not yet a public health emergency of international concern. They believe it is too early to declare this as most cases are contained in one nation and because of the current efforts of the Chinese government to contain the virus. The WHO also indicated that they are prepared to quickly reconvene their experts and revisit this position, as needed.

It is understandable when there are uncertainties that people get concerned, that people may worry, but I am here today to reassure you that based on the lessons we learned from SARS now 17 years ago, and given our experiences during the flu pandemic of 2009 and more recently, with Middle Eastern respiratory syndrome or MERS, we have learned, we have shared knowledge and we have built a stronger public health system that is ready to respond, as needed.

As I said at the beginning of my remarks, we do not have any confirmed cases in Canada and we will let you know if the situation changes. In the meantime, I am asking you to rely on evidence-based, credible sources of information when looking for updates. At Toronto Public Health, we are updating our website as new information is confirmed and we will continue to share information as quickly as it is available.

The provincial Ministry of Health, Public Health Ontario and The Public Health Agency of Canada are also great sources for information. The Public Health Agency routinely posts travel notices and provides advice on potential health risks while travelling. I encourage you to visit their site if you plan to travel.

I would also like to take this time to remind everyone to follow the flu and other respiratory virus prevention tips that I shared earlier – get your flu vaccine, wash your hands frequently, cover your cough or sneeze and stay home if you are ill.

For anyone who has recently travelled to countries where there are travel advisories, please make sure that you let your doctor's office know in advance of your visit.

Lastly, in the event that our situation changes locally, I can assure you that I will communicate directly with you to advise if there is a potential health risk to the residents of Toronto.

I would now be pleased to open the floor to any questions you may have. [END]