
President's Letter

March 4, 2020

COVID-19 Update: Follow-up on meeting with CMOH



Charlene Fitzgerald
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President

Dear Colleagues:

Last night, the NLMA met with the province's chief medical officer of health, Dr. Janice Fitzgerald, and other officials to discuss provincial planning for COVID-19. Dr. Fitzgerald advised that Public Health is currently operating in the containment phase, where efforts are focused on early detection to delay and reduce the spread of the virus.

Cases of COVID-19 in Canada have emerged in small clusters, mainly within immediate families. Canada is not yet encountering community spread of the virus. No cases have been confirmed in Newfoundland and Labrador. Trials are currently underway for ant-viral medications and vaccines; however, treatment is currently limited to supportive care.

Given the pattern of spread globally in recent days, preparations and planning efforts for mitigation are now underway in the province. Emergency plans are being updated and emergency simulation exercises and training are being conducted. Public Health is also preparing for the establishment of coordinated emergency operations and incident command structures. Surge capacity planning is also underway for medical care at health care facilities should resources become overwhelmed. Guidelines for case and contact management have also been sent to physicians.

The NLMA informed the CMOH that many community-based physicians are unable to get extra masks for their patients and other personal protective equipment (PPE) from their suppliers. As such, the NLMA recommended that Public Health provide physicians with these supplies given that they have been instructed by Public Health to don a surgical mask with face shield, gown and gloves, and provide patients with surgical masks if they present with symptoms. The NLMA also asked government to support the costs for PPE for community-based physicians, similar to other health care workers.

Dr. Fitzgerald said Public Health is aware of this need. Orders have been placed for additional supplies from manufacturers; however, there is a global shortage of supplies due to the significant world-wide demand and decreased production of PPE products in China. Public Health officials advised that in addition to health care providers in RHA facilities and emergency sites, those working in private family medicine clinics, long-term care facilities and private ambulance operators have all been identified as health care providers requiring PPE supplies.

The province is currently waiting on additional supplies and will determine how those supplies will be distributed based on the quantity it receives. All Canadian provinces are also working together to coordinate the distribution of resources. Health officials will determine the need to ramp up the distribution of limited supplies should efforts move from a containment phase to a mitigation phase if the virus becomes established. The issue of funding for PPE is being considered by the Government.

The NLMA has also recommended that the provincial government not require its employees to obtain sick notes from physicians if they are absent from work due to influenza-like illness, and that it instruct employers in the province to follow suit. The CMOH will discuss this recommendation with the provincial government.

It is the NLMA's position that employers should encourage their employees to stay at home when they are sick to prevent the spread of infections to their co-workers and vulnerable populations who present at medical clinics and hospital emergency departments. For more on the NLMA's position on sick notes, click [here](#).

To limit unnecessary exposure of the virus to vulnerable patients in primary care clinics and emergency departments, the NLMA has also recommended that triage sites be established where symptomatic patients can be assessed and treated if necessary (similar to the H1N1 clinics that were set up in the past). The CMOH acknowledged that such sites are under consideration and discussions are ongoing.

The NLMA also discussed phone lines for patients and physicians. Public Health has established a screening algorithm with advice for physicians on when to contact the medical officer of health and/or the emergency department, as well as when to instruct patients to call the public health office in their region. To download the screening algorithm tool, click [here](#).

Some members have inquired about screening patients when they call to make appointments in their clinics. Public Health advises that physicians should screen symptomatic patients for travel to affected areas of the world and not for symptoms alone, as symptoms are similar to seasonal influenza, which is already in the community. NLMA was also advised earlier today that public health nurses can safely test patients for COVID-19. If a patient calls a physician's office and has had suspected contact with the virus and is well, patients should be advised to stay home and public health will come and see them in their home and test them. Physicians are to call the MOH on call to arrange this. A screening tool outlining this process is currently being developed for frontline office staff and will be sent to physicians soon.

The government is also developing a communications strategy for messaging to the public about how to avoid infection and what to do if they develop symptoms of COVID-19. In addition, the Chief MOH is in regular contact with provincial media to relay important advice to the public. Public educational materials (such as posters for medical clinics) are also in discussion.

Some members have inquired about whether NLMA should take a more active role in communicating to the public about COVID-19. After serious discussion, the NLMA has decided to relay messaging from Public Health rather than craft our own, to avoid conflicting messages or the potential of creating confusion for the public given that the situation is changing so rapidly. The CMOH is the designated spokesperson on matters related to COVID-19 planning and response. The NLMA agreed to assist in the distribution of information to members and the public on behalf of the CMOH.

The CMOH noted all recommendations from the NLMA and agreed to present them to the provincial government. For the most up-to-date information, please visit the provincial COVID-19 web page at <https://www.health.gov.nl.ca/health/publichealth/cdc/coronavirus>.

Sincerely,



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President



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