



Medical Officer of Health Report to the Board

Tuesday, September 24th, 2024

Health Promotion

Renfrew County and District Drug Strategy

During the summer, RCDHU co-chaired further Steering Committee Meetings for the development and implementation of the Renfrew County and District Drug Strategy (RCDDS). At the June meeting the Steering Committee was provided with an update on the Harm Reduction Program at RCDHU. The following four preliminary recommendations were proposed:

1. Identifying and promoting a spotting service phone application for those that use drugs alone.
2. Continuing to expand access to the Ontario Naloxone Program by onboarding additional partners.
3. Implementing drug checking services.
4. Launching a centralized drug toxicity alert system using text messages.

Subsequently, the Harm Reduction Working Group held their first meeting to review the evidence supporting the preliminary recommendations and begin planning for implementation.

At the August meeting the Treatment Working Group provided their report, and the following preliminary recommendations were proposed:

1. Increase and expand existing high demand outpatient services currently exceeding service capacity.
2. Explore the possibility of establishing medical detox beds in Renfrew County.
3. Explore the possibility of establishing stabilization beds in Renfrew County.
4. Provide and support flexible transportation options to / from available residential treatment.
5. Review, optimize, and integrate mobile outreach services.
6. Continue to increase short and long-term supportive housing including availability and breadth of associated integrated services and specific services for people who use opioids.

7. Develop a communications strategy to ensure clients and providers are aware of the most up to date services, including recent improvements to remove barriers to existing services and care.
8. Train and support staff and services in addiction treatment, trauma informed, and culturally safe practices.
9. In-keeping with chronic care model, explore opportunities to improve flexible & responsive access throughout the continuum to meet individual needs and re-entry/engagement following recurrence/relapse.
10. Explore the possibility of expanding and embedding peer support throughout the continuum of services.

The Community Safety Working Group recently held their first meeting and will provide their update at the September Meeting. To ensure clear and consistent communication, a drug strategy communications team was also formed with representatives from RCDHU, Pembroke Regional Hospital, County of Renfrew, Deep River and District Health, City of Pembroke, and the Ottawa Valley Ontario Health Team.

In alignment with several of the preliminary recommendations of the RCDDS, RCDHU is also supporting the implementation planning of the Substance Use and Addiction Program funding for mobile substance use services.

Most recently, many of the partners from the RCDDS have committed to a coordinated and collaborative submission of an intent to apply for funding for the establishment of one of the Homelessness and Addictions Recovery Treatment (HART) Hubs. The cooperation and shared vision of the steering committee positions Renfrew County and District well for this emerging opportunity.

Drug Test Strips Program

In the final two weeks of August, RCDHU's harm reduction team began offering fentanyl, xylazine, and benzodiazepine test strip kits to clients. These kits, provided by the Ontario Harm Reduction Distribution Program, are intended to help reduce the risk of overdoses by allowing individuals to test drugs for the presence of these dangerous substances.

It is important to note that the test strips have limitations, including the potential for false negative results. Harm reduction staff provide education to clients prior to test strip distribution and will go through a questionnaire once these clients return to help evaluate the program.

Syphilis Point-of-care Rapid Testing and Immediate Treatment Evaluation (SPRITE) Program

Syphilis rates, including congenital syphilis, are rising in Ontario. Point-of-care testing can substantially reduce barriers to timely testing, diagnosis, and treatment for vulnerable populations who are disproportionately affected by syphilis and other sexually transmitted and blood borne infections.

RCDHU is participating in a Locally Driven Collaborative Project led by Kingston, Frontenac and Lennox & Addington (KFL&A) Public Health to provide point-of-care testing to underserved populations. Launched on August 20th, 2024, RCDHU Sexual Health and Harm Reduction nurses have implemented this program by attending community outreach events to offer testing for syphilis, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and hepatitis C virus, along with rapid treatment for syphilis. Testing is also provided in-office at the Pembroke location. Follow-up treatment and counselling is provided with the support of community partners.

RCDHU's current goal is to test 50 individuals prior to the end of 2024. As of September 13th, 20 individuals had been tested for syphilis, HIV, and hepatitis C through this program. This outreach has also provided a valuable opportunity to connect with the community and offer a range of other RCDHU services to individuals.

Oral Health

As per the *Oral Health Protocol*, during the 2023-2024 school year, students in moderate and high-risk schools in kindergarten and grades 2, 4 and 7 were screened by a registered dental hygienist. School risk level is determined by the rate of dental decay in the previous school year. In the 2023-2024 school year, all high and medium-risk level schools, as well as certain remote/rural schools, received an oral health screening by a registered dental hygienist.

New this year, the RCDHU oral health program hosted summer oral health screening clinics to reach eligible students in the community. This initiative aimed to provide children throughout Renfrew County and District with the opportunity to have their teeth screened and to receive support in accessing oral health care. Families booked an appointment or dropped in at a screening clinic.

The oral health team screened a total of 2038 students over 2023-2024, with 212 of these students receiving further support to access dental care and financial support.

Health Protection

Healthy Environments

Vector-borne Diseases:

In the month of September, public health inspectors are carrying out the second phase of tick surveillance for 2024. Ticks were found at four locations in May (areas in or around Petawawa, Pembroke, Eganville, and Renfrew); these locations will be monitored again. If ticks are found a second time at any of the four locations, those locations will be classified as a risk area for 2025. Current risk areas are Arnprior, Calabogie, and Cobden.

Every summer, RCDHU sets up mosquito traps at 14 different areas across Renfrew County and District (RCD) to monitor for West Nile virus and Eastern Equine Encephalitis virus over a ten-week period. This summer, 112 mosquito pools were tested and one pool tested positive for West Nile virus (in Arnprior).

Recreational Water:

RCDHU regularly tested 30 beaches throughout RCD over 11 weeks this summer to monitor water quality. Among other indicators, inspectors sample the beach water for *E. coli* levels. Only one beach had to be posted for high levels of *E. coli* bacteria this year (Cobden beach).

Blue-green algae sightings have been on the rise over the past few years. However, there were fewer sightings of algae blooms this summer, with no algae blooms testing positive for harmful algal toxins. The Ministry of Environment Conservation and Parks (MECP) conducted three field visits to sample for blue-green algae in 2024.

Health Hazards:

Each summer, RCDHU inspection staff complete routine recreational youth camp inspections in various regions, as far out as Algonquin Provincial Park. Camp operators are required by law to notify RCDHU of their intention to open. Inspectors focus on camp food preparation, recreational water safety, sanitary housing and waste disposal, and drinking water supply. There were 30 recreational camps inspected in 2024. All were permitted to operate.

Infectious Diseases

Respiratory Illness Activity:

COVID-19 activity in RCD has been increasing over mid to late summer and is at a higher level than it was over the same period last year. The province is also seeing increased activity for COVID-19, but levels remain lower than RCD. Preliminary data for the week of Sept 1st showed that COVID-19 test percent positivity was starting to decrease but remained high. Respiratory-related outbreak activity has been elevated for the last 6 weeks, with an average of 3 new respiratory outbreaks declared each week. There were 5 active respiratory outbreaks in RCD on Sept. 10th. The average daily hospital bed occupancy due to respiratory illness has also been elevated for the last 5 weeks (week 31-35). Respiratory-related emergency department visits remain relatively low.

Pertussis:

The province of Ontario is currently seeing an increase in Pertussis (whooping cough) cases. Starting at the end of July and into August, RCDHU has had 4 confirmed pertussis cases, multiple other probable cases, and one outbreak. Last year, there were no cases of pertussis reported to RCDHU.

Pertussis is an infectious disease affecting the lungs and throat that is easily transmitted from person to person, mainly through respiratory droplets from the nose, mouth, and throat of an infected person. Pregnant women in their third trimester and children under one year of age are at higher risk of complications of whooping cough.

Initial symptoms of whooping cough are similar to the common cold, including:

- Mild fever
- Runny nose
- Watery and red eyes
- Cough

The cough becomes stronger and more frequent after 7 to 14 days. Severe coughing fits can result in gasping for breath (and a distinctive “whooping” sound), as well as vomiting. Pertussis-related coughing can last up to 10 weeks.

The best way to protect against whooping cough is immunization. To maintain protection against whooping cough, repeated vaccination throughout the lifespan is needed:

- Infants require a dose at 2, 4, 6 and 18 months (4 doses);
- Children between 4 and 6 years old – 1 additional dose;
- Individuals between 14 and 16 years old – 1 additional dose;

- Adults require 1 booster dose once in adulthood and once in every pregnancy.

Residents can inquire about their immunization record or book an immunization appointment through their primary care provider or by calling RCDHU.

Immunization Program

Grade 7 School Based Immunization Program:

RCDHU staff have initiated the first round of school-based immunization clinics to facilitate the Grade 7 immunization program. It is estimated that approximately 1200 Grade 7 students across RCD will be eligible to receive the Hepatitis B, Meningococcal, and Human Papillomavirus vaccines through school-based clinics in the 2024-2025 school year. Up to 42 school-based clinics have been planned for the fall months, with plans for round two clinics in the spring of 2025.

RSV Vaccine:

In the fall of 2023, Ontario announced its first publicly funded high risk older adult Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) program. This fall, Ontario will continue this program with expanded eligibility to include all residents 60 years of age and older who are also:

- residents of long-term care homes, Elder Care Lodges, or retirement homes
- patients in hospital receiving alternate level of care (ALC) including similar settings (for example, complex continuing care, hospital transitional programs)
- patients receiving hemodialysis or peritoneal dialysis
- recipients of solid organ or hematopoietic stem cell transplants
- those experiencing homelessness
- those who identify as First Nations, Inuit, or Métis

RCDHU's immunization team will be offering both mobile and community-based immunization clinics to ensure access to RSV vaccine for older adults, along with dispensing RSV vaccine to all health care agencies with eligible populations.

Additionally, Ontario has announced a new infant and high-risk child RSV prevention program. This program will include all infants born during and outside the RSV season, and children under 2 years of age with high-risk medical conditions. Furthermore, RSV vaccine will also be available for pregnant individuals to protect newborns from RSV. Together with health care partners, RCDHU will ensure access to immunization services for this high-risk population.

Influenza and COVID-19 Vaccine:

It is anticipated that both Influenza and COVID-19 vaccines will become available to health units at the end of September. To support vaccination efforts, RCDHU is planning to offer mobile clinics to retirement homes and congregate care settings, along with mass immunization clinics in October for high risk individuals. Starting in November, the general population will be eligible for vaccination, and RCDHU will continue to offer mass immunization clinics for both the influenza and COVID-19 vaccines. Furthermore, the pharmacy channel will continue to serve as an access point to receive both vaccines.

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