

March 1, 2021

To the people whose work and businesses are affected by the Lockdown in Simcoe Muskoka:

Following the provincial announcement on Friday, February 26 that Simcoe Muskoka is entering the Grey-Lockdown status within its provincial COVID-19 Framework, I have received a lot of email from people expressing concern and opposition, and asking that their questions related to this be answered. The staff of the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) have also been monitoring social media, where many conversations are taking place, and they have provided some key messages in response. I have been interviewed by media on the topic, but I believe it's important that I also respond directly to you regarding these matters, through this letter.

Since late last year new strains of COVID-19 that are more contagious and more severe have originated from other locations around the world. These Variants of Concern have caused new waves of COVID-19 in the countries in which they have occurred – most notably the B.1.1.7 variant (the UK variant) that caused a severe wave in the UK. My concern as Medical Officer of Health has been with the arrival of the UK variant in Simcoe Muskoka and the potential for it to cause a third wave, a potentially much faster-moving and larger than the first two waves we experienced.

We now have a very large number of cases and outbreaks of the UK variant in Simcoe Muskoka. This started with three very large outbreaks of the UK variant in January in Simcoe County (including in Barrie), which has been followed with its rapid spread throughout Simcoe County and now into the District of Muskoka, with outbreaks due to variants in workplaces (including a restaurant), long-term care facilities, a childcare centre and an apartment complex, as well as a large and rapidly growing number of cases in the community that are unattached to outbreaks. We have the highest number of the variants of concern cases in Ontario.

Early this week I became concerned with a 30% increase in Simcoe Muskoka's overall case count of COVID-19 in the previous week (210 cases the week of February 7<sup>th</sup> to 275 cases the week of February 14<sup>th</sup>), including a doubling of the weekly case count in Barrie, coinciding with the continued spread of the UK variant in our communities. Please see Appendix A. On this basis, I recommended to the province that Simcoe Muskoka be moved into the Grey-Lockdown designation in order to help reduce the spread of the UK variant and COVID-19 overall, with the recognition that early control actions are more effective than later ones. I did so even though the overall case count for COVID-19 was only moderately elevated above the threshold for the designation of being in the Red / Control designation, as the province's Framework does not take into account the potential impact of the UK variant. Throughout the week I continued to provide the province with updated information demonstrating a continued rise in our UK variant cases and outbreaks. On that basis the province supported my recommendation.

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Since then, we have continued to monitor the data on COVID cases, and we found some reduction in the overall daily incidence of COVID-19 cases in the latter part of the week, however we have had additional UK variant outbreaks in workplaces and additional unlinked cases in our communities as well.<sup>1</sup>

With the announcement of the Grey-Lockdown in Simcoe Muskoka, many business owners and other citizens affected by this have reached out to me to express their deep concerns of the impacts on businesses including the endangerment of businesses and people's livelihood, the negative impacts on physical and mental health, the loss of access to cherished activities, and the inequity of this designation when considering the designation in neighbouring locations. They have also questioned the necessity of this designation, in particular in Muskoka, which is much less heavily impacted by COVID-19, as well as the apparent ineffectiveness of such restrictions in preventing people from more heavily impacted areas in the GTA from coming here. I am also aware of the concerns of this nature raised on social media, and in an online petition.

I wish to assure you that I read the emails that I received and take them very seriously. I have also reviewed this matter with some of our local mayors, and with Paul Markle, Executive Director for the Barrie Chamber of Commerce. With their breadth of knowledge, I gained a deeper appreciation of the impacts of these restrictions on businesses and on people's lives. I regret the difficulty that is caused by our response to the pandemic, even as we strive to reduce the illness and the deaths that occur from this tragic pandemic. The pandemic has been extremely difficult on us all.

In my work I have strived to be accountable, and have provided media interviews to explain the local situation at least weekly and at times daily. The SMDHU maintains detailed and current information on its website and provides this information via social media and through two-way communication to the public through in person, telephone, email and social media communication. I also reach out to local community leaders on a regular basis. I will continue to do so as needed as we work through this very challenging time.

I will also continue to provide the province with information on the health status of our communities regarding COVID-19 and the UK variant. It may be that our overall incidence of COVID-19 remains stable or declines despite the rise in the UK variant; if this is the case, we may be able to move into a lower colour designation in the provincial Framework in the near future. The designations are reviewed weekly by the province, though I recognize that frequent movement from one designation to another is a challenge in and of itself to manage. However, it is important to know that we may also see a rise in the incidence of COVID-19 due to the impact of the UK variant; this is the outcome that I am seeking to avoid with our present approach.

I wish to thank those who have reached out to me and provided me with your insights. This will help inform my decisions and my recommendations as we move forward in managing the pandemic. I would like to hold out the great hope of potential to bring the pandemic under control with the immunizations that we are providing to our communities. At present we have immunized the residents of all of our

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<sup>1</sup> Data on our COVID-19 cases can be found on our [Health Stats website](#).

long-term care facilities and retirement homes, and this is resulting in a great reduction in transmission and deaths among these the most vulnerable members of our communities. As we move forward with bringing vaccination to all adults who wish it over the weeks and months to come I am confident that we will bring the pandemic under control.

Again, thank you for your communications to me.

Sincerely,

**ORIGINAL Signed By:**

Charles Gardner, MD, CCFP, MHSc, FRCPC  
Medical Officer of Health

CG:cm

**Appendix A**

**Variant Results Received, Simcoe Muskoka**

Week of Variant Result Received	Negative	Lineage B.1.1.7	Mutation N501Y	Total Screening Results Received	Percent Positive (MOI or VOC)	Unable to screen (for information only)
Jan 31 – Feb 6	43	92	16	151	72%	0
Feb 7 – Feb 13	43	58	34	135	68%	11
Feb 14 – Feb 20	73	21	91	185	61%	15
Feb 21 – Feb 27	93	13	142	248	63%	25
Feb 29 – current (incomplete)	16	6	26	48	67%	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>268</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>309</b>	<b>767</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>54</b>

Note: There is a significant lag in the reporting of variant results, particularly to get the B.1.1.7 result (up to 4 weeks). Positive screening can also be lagged but results for most cases are received with 2-3 days. The number of variant cases reported for the last 14 days is likely an underestimate and are subject to change

**All COVID outbreaks: 190**

**173 (91%) Simcoe County**

**17 (9%) District of Muskoka**

**Variant Positive Outbreaks: 22**

**19 (86%) Simcoe**

**3 (14%) Muskoka**

**Variant Cases by Location of Residence, Simcoe Muskoka**

Location of Case	Total
<b>Simcoe County</b>	<b>484</b>
Sporadic	186 (38%)
Outbreak-related	218 (45%)
Secondary Transmission (from first 3 Variants of Concern outbreaks)	80 (17%)
<b>Muskoka District</b>	<b>15</b>
Sporadic	10 (67%)
Outbreak-related	5 (33%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>499</b>