

Ten years later ? A reflection on the 2003 SARS pandemic and the lessons learned for the future



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It's been 10 years since the SARS pandemic took the world by surprise and forever changed health care in the province of Ontario. The 2003 SARS outbreak was a frightening time for our health care system, front line doctors and nurses, public health officials, and for everyone around the province. Our health care system has changed dramatically since those dark days and we have made many improvements to our health care system and developed a province-wide pandemic plan.

After Toronto, York Region was the second largest area hit by SARS in North America.

SARS affected 86 York Region residents. There were eight deaths and the region serviced 7,011 people in quarantine.

Like health units around the province, the York Region Health Services rapidly mobilized to implement an emergency plan, which was a co-ordinated response with Health Canada, the Province of Ontario, hospitals, public health units and community partners.

The region was a leader in emergency implementation. Within a week of activating the York Region Emergency plan, a dedicated SARS assessment clinic was opened with the partnership of the Province of Ontario and the Markham Stouffville Hospital. This clinic was the only one in the province operated by a public health unit.

As the former commissioner of York Region Health Services and Medical Office of Health, I'm proud of the dedication, commitment and professionalism that York Region staff and our community partners offered throughout this critical health emergency.

While our region was a leader in implementation and emergency services, the response wasn't perfect. At the time, our province's health care professionals were doing their best but there was no provincial pandemic plan. Ontario's health care system's frontline staff were receiving different directives and all around the province, people were afraid.

The government had no way of knowing how many critical care beds were available in the province nor what patients were in them. This was something we knew we had to fix.

The provincial government consulted broadly, put information systems in place so that at any given moment we know the province's critical care capacity and can trigger surge plans to deal with an influx of patients. As a result of the SARS pandemic, our government:

- ? Developed a province-wide pandemic plan which we coordinated with the federal government.
- ? Supplied frontline staff with the tools they need to provide the best patient care and training in best practices.
- ? Began publicly reporting patient safety indicators.
- ? Made strategic investments in critical care capacity and infection control.
- ? Created Public Health Ontario, which provides support for infection prevention and control, disease surveillance, epidemiology and emergency preparedness.
- ? Ensured that the chief medical officer of health has enhanced powers to issue directives to boards of health and medical officers of health as well as to health care providers and health care entities during public health incidents.

The SARS illness changed how we respond to a health care crisis. It changed how York Region and the Province of Ontario work

with infectious disease control and emergency control. It changed how various health agencies around the province and throughout our communities work together.

In 2009, when our system was tested again, by H1N1. We were able to handle the situation with greater precision and care due to the lessons learned through the SARS crisis and the important changes made to our health care system by the Liberal government. Along with these improvements, we will need to continually improve and be diligent so that our health care system remains strong and we are prepared.

Critical health emergencies like SARS and H1N1 serve as a reminder that it is our health care professionals who form the foundation of our system. They are the quiet heroes and heroines whose selfless dedication to patient care is paramount.

I would like to take this opportunity to personally thank the health care professionals for the important work that they do every day.