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Let?s test communities

EDITORIAL

AMONG THE PHRASES we hear almost daily these days are ?flatten the curve,? ?social distancing? and ?community spread.?

The ?curves? in question are the charts showing the number of cases involving, and deaths from, COVID-19. ?Social distancing? includes everyone staying far enough apart (two metres) to avoid transmission of the virus, and ?community spread? identifies the extent to which individuals are getting the virus from someone else in their own community rather than as a result of traveling outside the community, or encountering someone who has picked up the virus while traveling.

Now that the pandemic has been with us since at least early February, COVID-19 has claimed about 296,0000 lives worldwide, with about one-third of the deaths (84,000+) in the United States, more than 5,300 in Canada, 1,700 of them in Ontario, and 30 of those in the area monitored by Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health.

As of Wednesday morning, WDG Public Health reported the detection of 329 COVID-19 cases, but only one new case in the previous 24 hours. While in most of the current cases the individuals were self-isolating at home, eight were hospitalized, four of them in ICU.

What do such statistics mean in terms of ?community spread? at a time when governments at all levels are considering how to deal with the disastrous economic consequences of the worst pandemic since 1918? In the U.S., governors of nearly all the 50 states are abiding by President Donald Trump's advice to re-open just about everything, rather than the experts' warning that lockdowns should remain in any state until there had been a two-week decline in new cases and deaths.

As a consequence, the gap between the number of cases and deaths per million population in Canada and the U.S. is widening ? 137 in Canada compared with 252 in the U.S.

Further complicating the matter is the fact that none of the statistics currently being offered to the public both here and abroad really deal with the extent to which both the number of cases and deaths are the result of ?community spread? rather than in institutional outbreaks, be they in long-term care facilities or meat packing plants. All we're being told is that nationally about 80 per cent of the deaths are seniors in long-term care.

In the circumstances, all the experts seem to agree that lockdowns and social-distancing should remain until widespread testing for the virus shows that it is safe to relax the rules. That seems to be the position taken by most of Canada's political leaders and a few U.S. governors.

As we see it, there is little likelihood of Canada's economy being restored until we reach the point where everyone feels it is safe to return to work, or to shop and enjoy such personal services as a haircut, massage or pedicure.

Since that obviously won't happen in any part of the country where there is continuing fear of community spread, the crucial need is to establish the absence of the virus through massive testing. (This week, we found that the only place in the U.S. where employees are being tested daily is the White House.)

Currently, only a tiny fraction of North Americans are being tested, with Ontario struggling to get more than 15,000 of our 14 million residents tested on any given day.

But, since regular testing of an entire population is seemingly impossible, what about the idea of massively testing some communities?

Why not pick a few mixed urban and rural municipalities in which all residents would be asked to get tests over a one-week period?

Take the Town of Mono and its 9,000 residents as an example of what we have in mind. If drive-through and/or ordinary testing centres were set up, the town's entire population could easily be tested over seven days and the results made available within another week, with individuals being notified only if they tested positive.

If nothing else, we would finally have credible information as to the presence of the virus in a local population and the resultant need or lack of it to continue lockdowns.