

COVID-19 updates for the week of March 14

by MICHAEL RILEY Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

In Canada, according to the chief public health officer of Canada Dr. Theresa Tam, in a news release from March 11, during the latest seven-day period from Mar. 4 to Mar. 10, an average of 5,583 new cases were reported daily across the country, a decrease of 3.7 per cent versus last week. During the period from Mar. 3 to March 9, laboratory test positivity remained at 13 per cent, indicating there's still widespread activity across Canada. Severe illness trends continue to lower with weekly declines in many jurisdictions. During the past week (Mar. 4 to Mar. 10) an average of 4,550 people were in hospital with COVID-19 each day, a 13 per cent reduction from the week before. On average, 546 people were in the ICU, which is a 12 per cent decline from the previous week, while an average of 51 deaths were reported daily. In Ontario, as of March 14, there were 1,116 new cases reported. There were 602 hospitalizations, with 229 people in the ICU. There were no new deaths reported over the last 24 hours, so the figure of 12,256 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic remains static. In Hastings Prince Edward, as of March 14, there were 72 new high-risk cases and active high-risk cases amounted to 175 people. There were six outbreaks in high-risk settings like LTC homes, and there were 44 deaths reported. There are nine people who are currently hospitalized at Quinte Health Care hospitals and two people are in the ICU. A new COVID-19 variant detected by WHO A new COVID-19 variant has been found by The World Health Organization in France, the Netherlands, Denmark and the U.S. that researchers have called Deltacron, as it has attributes of both the Omicron and Delta variants of the virus. The new variant does not seem to spread as easily, and may not elevate to a variant of concern based on current data, according to one of the researchers in the U.S., chief science officer William Lee at the California based medical lab Helix, although research and study on this variant continues. Viruses such as COVID-19 have the capacity to change and mutate over time, which is typical for viruses in general. Every change is called a mutation, while a virus with one or more mutations is called a variant. According to the WHO website, a variant is considered a variant of interest if it has mutations that are suspected or known to cause significant changes and is circulating widely. A variant of interest becomes a variant of concern if it is known to spread more easily, cause more severe disease, eludes the body's immune response, change clinical presentation or decrease the effectiveness of public health measures, diagnostics, treatments and vaccines. While Deltacron may not be as transmissible or potent as earlier variants, researchers say that Deltacron is an interesting phenomenon and allows them to understand more about the virus evolves and how the pandemic continues to go on. It also underlines the need to continue to monitor variants as they occur in case a variant is more deadly or transmissible than the original COVID-19 virus. **Mask mandates gone by March 21, other restrictions by April 27** Mask mandates will be ended in Ontario as of March 21, including schools, restaurants, gyms and stores. According to the province's chief medical officer Dr. Kieran Moore, all other COVID-19 regulations will cease by April 27. These moves, announced by Moore on March 9, have arisen due to improving health indicators, Ontario's high vaccination rate and the availability of antiviral treatments. Moore said that Ontarians are now learning to live with the virus and a more balanced approach to the pandemic is now required. However, despite the mask mandate being dropped, Moore stressed that the risk is still here and the pandemic is not over, that the mandate may need to be put back into place if there is another spike in COVID-19 cases, and that vulnerable people should still take precautions despite the restrictions being relaxed. The mask mandates will remain for the time being for public transit, long term care and retirement homes, shelters, jails and congregate care and living settings. All remaining mask requirements and emergency regulations will cease on April 27. However, some experts, like Dr. Peter Juni, the head of Ontario's COVID-19 science table advisory, and Dr. Gerald Evans, an infectious diseases physician, say it is too soon to lift the restrictions and they argue that it is not supported by science. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario also criticized the move, saying it will put students at risk of having in person learning potentially being disrupted again