

Health Unit increases vaccine appointments in South Algonquin

By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

On Jan. 5, Bancroft This Week asked Jim Etmanski, the executive director of the South Algonquin Family Health Team for an update on their efforts to blunt the impact of COVID-19 in their township, especially in light of the new Omicron variant. He said they've increased the number of vaccine appointments as per Ministry of Health directives, they had a successful vaccination clinic on Dec. 22, they continue to remain available for primary care appointments, either virtually or in-person as long as it can be done safely for patients and staff, and the Whitney pharmacy is offering COVID-19 booster shots to residents as they are able to.

Etmanski told Bancroft This Week that locally they have followed the Ministry of Health's directive they got on Dec. 12 and they bumped up their planned vaccine clinic dates and the number of appointments offered to accommodate their patients and the residents in South Algonquin and the surrounding area. He said that this meant increasing the number of vaccine appointments to the levels from last spring.

"We ran a successful clinic in-house for approximately 154 people on Dec. 22 and plan to do another in mid to late January of 2022, although details for this are not yet finalized," he says.

At the same time, the SAFHT is continuing to remain open and operational for primary care appointments, either virtually or in-person as they deem appropriate, according to Etmanski. He says this is to address the Ministry's request to contribute to keeping as much pressure off of hospital emergency departments as possible.

Etmanski revealed that their local pharmacy in Whitney was also providing COVID-19 booster shots to residents as they are able. In addition to helping with some of the demand, Etmanski says that they anticipate high demand for booster shots to continue over the next several weeks and winter months.

Mitul Pavagadhi is the owner and pharmacist at Whitney Pharmacy and he says that the booster shot campaign is going very well so far.

"This time, we had enough supply of Moderna and Pfizer vaccines. Since now anyone over 18 years is eligible to get their third dose after six months, most of the people are eligible and getting their vaccines. Demand for vaccines has gone down from this week as many people have received their booster dose already in Whitney and the surrounding area. We have a website where people can apply to be on the wait list if they haven't received their booster shot yet; <https://whitneypharmacy.medmeapp.ca/schedule>," he says.

So far, Etmanski says they haven't had any major difficulties with the rising number of cases due to the Omicron variant. According to the Renfrew County District Health Unit website (rcdhu.com), as of Dec. 30, there were 10 cumulative cases of COVID-19 in South Algonquin, with less than five active cases.

Etmanski says they continue to monitor the situation locally.

"And we'll also be operating with caution to preserve the safety and well-being of our staff, so as not to be faced with closing our office due to illness and/or absenteeism."