

Vaccinations keep students returning to school this week safer



MICHAEL RILEY Staff

I FIRST CAME UP here to Bancroft to start writing for Bancroft This Week barely a month after the pandemic officially had begun. Now, two years after the CDC declared COVID-19 a global health emergency in Jan. 2020 and a little over 22 months after they declared it a pandemic, the virus is still raging on, with the Omicron variant having become the predominant strain of the virus. Here in Canada, while COVID-19 has affected everyone to some degree, it has been particularly devastating to the elderly and those with compromised immune systems. Another demographic that has also felt the strain are school aged children of all ages. They have been affected greatly by the lack of in-person learning due to COVID-19 restrictions including school closures and transitioning to online learning. The lack of social immersion that goes with online learning as well as the relatively poor Wi-Fi connectivity in some parts of North Hastings and South Algonquin Township, that make connecting to this online learning difficult, have made the past two years challenging for children in Bancroft and the surrounding areas. While a return to class in Ontario was originally planned for Jan. 3, the province initially pushed that date back to Jan. 5 to get more N95 masks out to staff and to circulate 3,000 more HEPA filter units. That new opening date was once again changed to Jan. 17, with an announcement by Premier Ford on Jan. 10. Kids would learn remotely and online until this new opening date. The province cited the rapid spread of COVID-19 as the reason for this delay. The Renfrew County District Health Unit's acting medical officer of health Dr. Robert Cushman put out a memorandum on Jan. 14 in advance of children being allowed to go back to school this week, as well as a YouTube video. In these, he emphasized the importance of keeping the schools open but noted that the vaccination rates amongst school aged children, specifically those five years to 11 years old, needed to be increased as they were currently at 40 per cent. This was in contrast to those in the 12 years to 18 years demographic, which had an 80 per cent vaccination rate. Dr. Cushman also revealed that those in the 20 years to 40 years age group also had a low vaccination rate, which he said were mostly the parents of the children five years to 11 years old who are currently unvaccinated. "If we want the schools open, the best way to do this is to have high vaccination rates. The teachers are all trying to get their boosters for next week but we still need to vaccinate all the kids," he says. For anyone with any trepidation about the vaccine, especially for their children, Dr. Cushman told them that the dose for the Pfizer MNRA vaccine they'll be getting is 1/3 the dose that is administered to the 12 years to 18 years age group. This pediatric vaccine was approved for use by Health Canada in late November, and Dr. Cushman says he's seen very few problems in the data he's examined from the U.S. and from Renfrew County. "I'd say it's more dangerous to drive to the hockey rink than it is to get the dose of the vaccine for children between the age of five years and 11 years," he says. In Renfrew County, Cushman says that only one of the 3,300 doses administered so far has been brought to his attention. He also noted that with the protection the vaccinations provide, people only have a 1/11 chance of having to go to the hospital with COVID-19 and a 1/30 chance of being admitted to the Intensive Care Unit. The most frequently reported reactions to the shot were injection site pain, fatigue and

headaches. Cushman said that before Christmas they'd noticed lots of problems with school outbreaks in Renfrew County, with Delta and especially Omicron spreading wildly within classes and within families and homes. What does it mean? It means it can jeopardize a given class or even a given school. Also, it can tie a family down from work, from play and from school. We hope in the next few weeks that with Omicron moving through that the peak will be over but we don't want a recurrence. And that is why it is so important that we vaccinate as many people as we can," he says. In South Algonquin Township, which is part of the RCDHU, Jim Etmanski, the executive director of the South Algonquin Family Health Team, told Bancroft This Week on Jan. 5 that they had a successful vaccine clinic on Dec. 22 and another one is planned for later this month, final date and time to be determined. He also revealed that the Whitney Pharmacy was providing booster shots to those who qualify and are interested in getting them, and Mitul Pavagadhi, the owner and pharmacist at Whitney Pharmacy says that the booster shot campaign is going very well so far. So, let's take Dr. Cushman's advice and get as many people vaccinated as possible, those with medical and religious exemptions excepted of course. That way, for both the children in school and for everyone else, COVID-19 will be a memory sooner rather than later, and we can get back to some sense of normalcy that we had pre-COVID-19. With some hard work, dedication, and a little bit of luck, by the time I celebrate my third anniversary writing for Bancroft This Week next April, this will have come to pass.