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SKEPTICISM OVER COVID-19 RESPONSE GROWING

By Peter Menzies
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News that not one but two COVID-19 vaccines have tested 95 per cent effective casts a welcome burst of light into Canada's gloomy COVID-19 narrative, amid signs the pandemic is ripping into the nation's social fabric.

Moderna announced that its vaccine candidate proved 94.5 per cent effective in trials. Meanwhile, Pfizer and its partner BioNTech followed up their earlier announcement by confirming final results are five per cent higher than the 90 per cent originally announced.

Further review and regulatory approvals still await, including here in Canada. But the companies say first doses could ship as early as the end of November.

But hold the rooftop cheering. According to Angus Reid

polling, only 39 per cent of Canadians say they would get an approved vaccine injection right away if one became available. And 23 per cent believe the threat of COVID-19 has been exaggerated, assumedly by distrusted media and public officials.

When you consider that 66 per cent of the population must be vaccinated for the virus to be successfully suppressed, that's a problem.

Such skepticism is growing globally, according to Timothy Caulfield of the University of Alberta. He's a professor of law, research director of its Health Law Institute, and Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy.

"We knew that the spread of misinformation was going to be bad, but I was naively optimistic that people would recognize the value of science and the harm of misinformation and it wouldn't deteriorate as badly as it has," Caulfield told CBC.

"People are now watching sci-

ence unfold ... so they're seeing the uncertainty. They're seeing how studies don't always go in the same direction. That's how science normally happens but people are watching this sausage being made and they don't like what they see."

Nor do they like the idea that — even in a good cause — the state's power over them is being expanded. Rallies by anti-maskers continue to pop up across the country. An alarming number of otherwise sensible people seem convinced Prime Minister Justin Trudeau plans to place thousands of us in COVID-19 concentration camps. The PM's apparent conviction that it's up to him whether Christmas occurs doesn't help.

Tom Sampson, the head of the Calgary Emergency Management Agency, compared the pandemic to a tsunami. He described on Twitter how while some people will stand and watch as

the wave approaches, "the enlightened" head for the hills at the first warning.

No doubt well-intended, Sampson seemed oblivious to the fact that bankruptcies in Canada grew by 20 per cent in September. Many of those on the beach may be among the 700,000 who have lost their jobs this year. They need to pay the rent and have no place else to go.

Then there's Alberta Senator Paula Simons, who recently let the Twitterverse know she isolated herself for the past eight months. A self-described model COVID-19 citizen, she too appeared blind to the reality that her circumstances are profoundly different from those afforded the privilege of delivering her groceries.

How did we — the most highly educated cohort in the history of humanity — get here?

It's worth considering whether it's not so much the message but the messengers who are struggling here.

Maybe it's because the same experts and media who are

shouting at us to wear our masks were telling us as recently as April that wearing a mask is not the way to go and might actually increase the risk of transmission.

Or that the very voices who reported it was safe to go back to work are now telling us to work from home again.

Or that while it's not safe to be in groups of more than 15, it's just fine for 30 or more people to gather for several hours every day in classrooms.

Or that well-spaced, well-ventilated church services and little kids' hockey are life-threatening when kindergarten and daycare aren't.

Whatever little wedges of mistrust were placed by these and similar events, it's increasingly clear that while, yes, we're all supposed to be in this together, we're actually not. At all.

As the voices of those who will never miss a paycheque

or rent payment grow ever louder and more empathetic in demanding that others (but not them) sacrifice their livelihoods, and blame them for rising COVID-19 deaths, the schism of anger and distrust risks widening.

This is an incredibly difficult challenge for public health authorities, who need our support as they work to up their messaging game or suffer an increasing number of people tuning them out.

More and more, after all, are making fun of them.

Commenting on restricted alcohol serving hours, one social media wit noted "last call is now at 10 p.m. because that's what time the COVID comes out." A father, responding to the suspension of team sports, tweeted: "Hockey is cancelled so this afternoon I'm taking my son's U9 team to the bar."

Mockery is a poor foundation for stability, which we need to truly absorb even great news. Surely even the enlightened will see that.

ONTARIO SUPPORTING SMALL BUSINESSES WITH FINANCIAL ADVICE AND TRAINING

The Ontario government is investing over \$2.2 million through the Ontario Together Fund to provide small businesses with free, tailored financial advice and online training to help them make informed financial decisions and navigate the unprecedented economic circumstances brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

When included alongside the 2020 Ontario Budget, Ontario's Action Plan: Protect, Support, Recover and the Main Street Recovery Plan, these supports are part of a comprehensive package of proposed legislation, funding programs, and services and resources to help small businesses when and where they need it the most.

"Many small businesses across the province are being hit hard by COVID-19, and our government is doing everything it can to help them

get back on their feet and recover, not just today, but every step of the way," said Minister Fedeli. "By providing these entrepreneurs with financial advice and training we can arm them with the information they need to remain viable and contribute to Ontario's economic recovery."

Ontario is providing \$2,040,000 to support Ontario's 47 Small Business Enterprise Centres (SBEC) led by the Business Advisory Centre Durham to create a new Small Business COVID-19 Recovery Network. This network will enhance the capacity of all SBECs across the province to expand their services, supporting businesses across the province.

The project will also build one central portal where businesses can access digital tools and training, connect with mentors and industry experts,

and get information on government programs to help them navigate COVID-19 and beyond. Through this network, up to 75,000 small businesses in Ontario can be reached.

The government is also providing \$131,000 for Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada to develop and deliver a four-part COVID-19-specific financial literacy tool kit for small businesses. Key components of the project include podcasts, webinars and online booklets that will focus on pandemic recovery, cash management, managing risks, and information on small business tax.

Ontario is also providing \$51,000 for Financial Advisors Association of Canada, a non-profit association of financial advisors, to provide pro-bono professional financial advice for small companies through its online plat-

form, Advocis Connect. With the government's support, the association will connect small businesses with financial advisors for free advice on the current financial state of their business, how to pivot the business to manage the current economic emergency, and guidance for applying to federal and provincial government support programs.

"Small businesses are the backbone of Ontario's economy and they are making extraordinary sacrifices to keep their employees safe, their customers confident and their communities strong during these toughest times," said Minister Sarkaria. "These new programs build on our government's commitment to be in the corner of small businesses and previous actions including our Main Street Recovery Plan, our \$60 million personal protective equipment grant program and helping small businesses build their e-commerce presence, among others."

The Ontario government also

launched applications for eligible businesses to apply for the Main Street Relief Grant and temporary property tax and energy cost rebates through a single, online application portal. Many businesses should expect to receive their grants or rebate payments within a few weeks of finalizing and submitting their completed application. The Main Street Relief Grant is available to small businesses with two to nine employees in retail, accommodations and food services, repair and maintenance, and personal and laundry services to help cover personal protective equipment costs.

QUICK FACTS

In October, the government launched the Ontario's Main Street Recovery Plan and introduced the Main Street Recovery Act, 2020, proposed legislation that would support small businesses and modernize rules to allow them to innovate and meet the challenges of today. If passed, the act will remove hurdles faced

by small businesses and allow them to pursue new opportunities — while maintaining or enhancing protections for public health, safety and the environment.

The government launched the \$50 million Ontario Together Fund to help businesses retool their operations to produce PPE and develop technology-driven solutions and services for businesses to reopen safely.

Businesses and individuals looking to help in the fight against COVID-19 can submit their proposals through the Ontario Together web portal.

The Workplace PPE Supplier Directory provides businesses with information on personal protective equipment (PPE) suppliers.

This November marks the 10th anniversary of Financial Literacy Month in Canada, which reminds Ontarians of the importance of understanding and managing personal finances.

2020 FESTIVE R.I.D.E. CAMPAIGN LAUNCH

This holiday season may look a little different than in years past, but the message around impaired driving remains the same - it will not be tolerated on our roads. Our Festive R.I.D.E. team will be out in the community over the next eight weeks making sure our roadways are safe. COVID-19 has brought about many changes and for the safety of everyone, officers will be maintaining social distance and wearing PPE during R.I.D.E. stops. We are reminding motorists that if you are celebrating this holiday season, make sure you make arrangements if you plan on consuming alcohol or cannabis.

Chief Todd Rollauer helped kick-off a modified Festive R.I.D.E. launch in Whitby this week and had a message for motorists. "I'm asking you to make smart choices, arrange for alternative means to get home, please do not drive impaired, be responsible, and do your part to keep our roadways safe this holiday season. If you believe you see an impaired driver, please call 9-1-1." Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) also launched its annual "Project Red Ribbon" campaign to raise awareness about making responsible choices to prevent tragedies on our roads during the holidays. "Even though the usual parties and celebrations may be different this year, the holiday season is still a busy time on our roads with a high risk for impaired driving," said MADD Durham Chapter President Trisha Dosaj Makarov. "Our red ribbon is a symbol of the importance of always driving sober. We're urging people to take a few minutes to plan ahead. If you're going to be consuming alcohol, cannabis or other drugs, leave the car at home."

If you see a driver you suspect is impaired, please call 9-1-1 to report it to police; the call you make could save a life. DRPS wishes everyone a safe and happy holiday season!

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