



Manitoba Liberal Caucus 169-450 Broadway Ave R3C 0V8

Jan 7, 2022

Dear Premier Stefanson,

We are writing today to express some very serious concerns about comments that were made at the press conference on Tuesday, January 4, about the Omicron variant of Covid-19, as well as an apparent lack of a plan to deal with it.

We want to be clear. There is a difference between hopeful thinking and wishful thinking.

There are many reasons for hope. Vaccines are working and are preventing many worst-case outcomes for Covid. However, too many Manitobans are still unvaccinated.

We have consulted with doctors and public health experts before writing this letter, and we have some concerns and questions we would like to have answered - particularly since school boards and students will be expected to return to school on January 17, just ten days from now.

Can these measures be put in place by the time school is slated to reopen?

- **Will ELCC workers, teachers and education workers and students be immediately prioritized for mandatory vaccine boosters?** When? Boosters take days to come to full effect. Will everyone be fully immunized in time for reopening?
- **Will you prioritize Public Health Contact Tracing, PCR Testing, and Rapid Antigen Test Kits - for staff, students and children in schools, childcare centres, and people living in vulnerable communities and settings?** Will you have mandatory test-to-stay programs, and provide training and support to ensure that these measures are done properly? Will these be ready for January 17?
- **Will you be able to improve ventilation**, provide CO2 Monitoring and provide HEPA Filtration Units in all learning spaces - for schools and childcare centres and other locations? If HVAC systems cannot be quickly replaced, will you consider portable filtration units?
- **Will you be able to provide properly fitting N95 (or equivalent) Masks - for staff, students and children** in schools/childcare centres? Will you make them mandatory? According to Health Canada, masks can be recycled – will you provide guidance on how?
- **Will you introduce a compensation scheme** so that parents, or caregivers can take “Paid Covid Days” so they can isolate safely while they wait for test results, or while they self-isolate?

We also want to express serious concern about what may be “wishful thinking” at the January 4 press conference, particularly when yourself and Dr. Atwal repeated that Omicron is “milder” – you even said that it could have no symptoms at all.

We consulted with an infectious disease expert who emphasized that “the data is continuing to show that Omicron has a lower risk of severe disease than Delta, however this should not be conflated with Omicron being “mild”. COVID as a whole has a very broad range of symptoms across demographics.”

With respect, we are concerned that you are making a very serious **mistake in calculating risk** because the risk of Omicron is two factors multiplied together - not severity alone, but **severity times infectivity**.

Many doctors and researchers have expressed caution about jumping to conclusions about Omicron being “mild”. Reasons that symptoms may be milder include the effectiveness of vaccinations, or because people have some immunity from previous infection, or the demographics associated with earlier rises in case counts.

We know that vaccines have been incredibly effective from Manitoba’s own statistics: while the vast majority of Manitobans are vaccinated, the vast majority of people with the worst covid symptoms - in ICUs or who are dying from Covid are much more likely to have been unvaccinated.

It is true, that for many individuals that are not considered at high-risk for severe COVID, the risk of serious complications from infection, including being hospitalized or in ICU is low.

However, for the entire population, it is an absolute certainty that there will be hospitalizations and increased health care system stress due to the very high transmissibility of Omicron and the rapid rise in infections across communities. We need to think in terms of all Manitobans, not just individual cases, because we are all connected. We are already seeing this in rising hospitalizations and ICU admissions.

1) Dr. Kevin Kavanagh wrote in *Infection Control Today* that “**Infectivity causes more harm and deaths than lethality and in the case of Omicron more than makes up for its somewhat milder infections in immunologically naive individuals.**”

The risk of a disease variant is not just how lethal it is. It is lethality times infectivity.

Simply put, **even if one strain of a virus is half as virulent, if it is four times as infectious, many more people will die or be hurt from the disease.**

A disease with 1% mortality rate that infects 1,000 people means 10 people will die. A disease with a 0.5% mortality rate that infects 10,000 people means that 50 will die.

Both morbidity and mortality are associated with covid. Because of the high infectivity, there will be many more cases and there is the risk of a surge in cases as everyone get sick at once.

If that happens, at the same time our health care system is overwhelmed with patients, the services we depend on to provide care will be depleted of caregivers who cannot work at the very time they are most needed.

That includes workers in education, health, early learning and child care, and seniors care homes - people working in the caring professions who need the most protection.

Given the existing depletion in the ranks of nurses and others in our health care system, it risks being overwhelmed.

2) We are concerned that you are abandoning the central tenet of public health - preventing infections - and that you are choosing instead to let Omicron rip through the population with the hope that it will provide “herd immunity,” and eventually become “endemic” like a cold or the flu.

If that is the case, would you please be up front with Manitobans that that is what you are choosing to do? Because it is a risky choice that could have long-term impacts on the life and health of children, parents and families in this province.

Some data suggests that the Omicron variant is leading to higher hospitalizations of children in the U.S. and Canada.

3) Experts have expressed two concerns about covid variants spreading out of control – that **there are long-term health concerns associated with “long covid”** and that **the hope of lasting “herd immunity” from exposure alone may be optimistic**, given how quickly COVID develops new variants.

Covid is not just a respiratory virus, and even people with “mild covid” can have long lasting mental and physical symptoms because it affects multiple parts of the body, including the brain, heart and other organs. This includes children as well as adults.

We are concerned with the assumption that allowing a variant like Omicron to spread through the population will create herd immunity, when SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID, has evolved and changed so rapidly throughout the pandemic.

Vaccine boosters are needed, and effective, to deal with these changes, because **a number of studies show that natural immunity fades and that vaccine protections are longer lasting.**

4) Finally, **the uncontrolled spread of Covid is associated with a higher risk of new variants.** As one person put it, “Every unnecessary covid infection is the opportunity to create a shiny new variant.”

We hope you can answer these questions. We urge you to focus on hopeful thinking, not wishful thinking. There are many measures your government could be taking immediately that will keep Manitobans safer and lower cases, but it requires a level of coordination, discipline, compliance and communication that your government has not yet delivered.

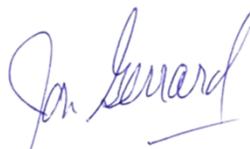
Yours,



Dougald Lamont,
MLA St. Boniface



Cindy Lamoureux,
MLA Tyndall Park



Dr. Jon Gerrard
MLA River Heights

Cc: Minister Gordon, Minister Cullen, Minister Squires, Dr. Roussin and Dr. Reimer