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COVID-19 Vaccine Plan Part II – September is too late

News in December of the approval and arrival of 2 COVID-19 vaccines, offered much-needed optimism that an end to lockdowns and the road to recovery was in sight. However, as the colder reality of January begins to sink in, Canada's near term fortunes are not looking as bright.

Canada's vaccine plan - on shaky ground

Canada's vaccine plan is short on details and long on assumptions. This is compounded by the lack of a single, official, national public online location to report progress in achieving Canada's vaccine distribution plan.

The federal government claims that 3 million people will be vaccinated by end of March, 15-19 million people by end of June, and all 38 million Canadians by the end of September.

However, the numbers by province/territory, per week and by age group, and the required daily vaccination rate to achieve these goals has not been provided. It is also unclear whether the term "vaccinated" refers to a single dose or the two doses necessary for immunity.

Both Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccine requires 2 doses, 21 days and 28 days apart respectively, and any report on Canada's immunization progress must differentiate between those who have received only one dose versus two.

Most importantly, the federal government has conceded that the success of the vaccination timeline is predicated on the assumption that considerably more doses will be delivered, sooner than are currently confirmed. They have not said how many more doses by when, and with stretched global supply this is a significant risk.

The reality is that achieving the current plan of Canada's population vaccinated by September 2021 is on shaky ground. Worse still, September is simply not fast enough.

Faster is possible – and critical

The federal government may have secured access to the greatest number of doses, but they failed to ensure speedy delivery. In contrast, Israel signed a contract with Pfizer over three months after Canada, has received more doses, faster and has vaccinated more than 1.8 million people. The latest data shows the US and UK have vaccinated 6.7 million and 1.3 million respectively. Canada has vaccinated less than 300,000.

Israel is administering 110,000 doses/day, the US 770,000 doses/day and the UK 60,000 doses/day (all weekly averages). Canada is at 28,000 doses/day and slowing significantly as vaccine doses begin to run out. Canada needs a rate of 285,000 doses/day, to meet even a September target and far more to accomplish an earlier date.

Israel is forecasting to have its population of 8.6 million vaccinated by April. The US is committed to 100 million doses by April and the majority of its population by June, and the UK will complete its population by April. Canada's forecast of September is tragically months behind our peers.

The price of a slow vaccine roll out is too high

Speed matters in this fight. The longer our population is without a vaccine, the greater the risk that the virus won't be contained and more lives will be lost.

Moreover, the virus will continue to mutate risking that current strategies will be ineffective as the new COVID-19 strain B117 is said to be more contagious, and the effectiveness of the vaccine against the South African strain is unknown. Canada is in a race to vaccinate faster than the virus can transmit and mutate.

Time is of the essence economically and socially. Canada is in a race to open our economy at the same time as our commercial partners and competitors. If not, they will build supply chains with countries that are open, leaving us behind. Their lives will return to 'normal' while we watch from the sidelines.

A rampant virus and corresponding lockdowns also exacts a high price on the mental health and wellbeing of our population often leading to suicide, domestic abuse and civil unrest further demonstrating that time is a luxury we don't have.

Canada is in a race against time. The federal government had months to plan and prepare a comprehensive vaccine distribution plan. An end of September vaccination schedule is too late. The price of delay is simply too high. This crisis affects the country as a whole, and the federal government must lead. Canada needs a better plan that delivers more vaccines, much sooner.

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