

Medical Officer of Health: Report to The Board of Health

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Medical Officer of Health Update

As we complete the *Immunization of School Pupils Act* (ISPA) cycle for grades 7-12 this month, I am seeing a concerning decline in vaccination rates compared to pre-pandemic levels. To be compliant with ISPA, a parent or guardian must ensure that their school-aged child is either up to date on ISPA vaccines (diphtheria, tetanus, polio, pertussis, measles mumps, rubella, meningococcal disease, and varicella for those born after 2010), has a valid medical exemption, or has an affidavit on file indicating objection due to conscience or a religious belief. The Health Unit is seeing an increasing proportion of students for whom an affidavit has been filed, and an increasing proportion that are not compliant.

The Chief Public Health Officer's 2024 Annual Reportⁱ indicates that, in Canada, only 92% of children in 2021 and 87% of adults in 2023 had received any measles vaccines. Decreasing vaccination rates have significant implications for the transmission of serious infections, such as measles, polio, and meningococcal infections. Currently, an outbreak of measles is occurring in southwestern Ontario, primarily among unvaccinated individuals or those who have received only one of the two measles shots required for immunity. We could see many more similar or larger outbreaks if vaccination rates do not rebound higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Measles is preventable with vaccination, but it is highly transmissible among those who are not protected. We need more than 95% of people to be fully vaccinated to have "herd immunity" in a given population. As the number of people who are not up to date on the measles vaccine increases, so does the likelihood that individuals who cannot be protected by vaccination (such as infants or those with immunocompromising conditions) will be exposed to the infection. Measles infections can cause pneumonia, encephalitis (brain swelling), and long-term complications such as deafness, blindness, brain injury, and death. Pregnant individuals infected with measles are at risk of miscarriage, pre-term labour, and delivering an infant with low birth weight.

A local measles outbreak would require an extremely resource intensive response from the Health Unit, necessitating some public health services to be put on hold. Measles is highly contagious, with the virus remaining in the air for up to two hours after an infected individual has left a room. Each case can generate many contacts and more than 90% of susceptible contacts of a case are likely to become infected without prophylaxis. The response would involve identifying, interviewing, and assessing susceptibility for each contact, as well as providing counseling and arranging post-exposure prophylaxis if indicated.

Decreased access to routine vaccinations during the COVID-19 pandemic and increased vaccine hesitancy due to mis- and disinformation are contributing to lower vaccination rates. Addressing this issue will require time and collaboration among many players. Some actions that can be taken to increase vaccine uptake and acceptance include:

- Providing multiple opportunities for vaccination (e.g., school and community clinics, support for primary care) and reducing barriers to getting vaccination (e.g., electronic consent forms for vaccinations in school).
- Issuing transparent, clear, and consistent communications tailored to the unique concerns and motivations of the recipient or priority populations, to foster greater confidence in vaccines.
- Upskilling/providing tools to trusted clinicians to support vaccine discussions with patients and clients.
- Building back trust in healthcare institutions by engaging equity-seeking populations and addressing discrimination in health care access.
- Creating interoperable digital platforms that facilitate population-based vaccine surveillance and enhance uptake (e.g., digital reminders).
- Increasing digital media literacy and vaccine literacy among the public.
- Leveraging community leaders and champions to broker vaccine discussions with priority populations.
- Embedding community engagement in the vaccine development process.

i Public Health Agency of Canada. Chief Public Health Officer of Canada's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2024: Realizing the Future of Vaccination for Public Health. Ottawa, ON: Public Health Agency of Canada; 2024.

Programs and Services Updates

Corporate Services

Emergency Management

The Health Unit continues to monitor the Ontario Vigilance Bulletins from Environment Canada, which provides warnings of extreme cold weather events. As per policy, an Extreme Cold Weather Alert is issued when:

- Environment Canada forecasts a temperature of -15 degrees Celsius or colder, or
- Wind chill values reach -20 degrees Celsius or colder

Alerts are communicated to Community Emergency Management Coordinators and the District of Nipissing Social Services Administration Board's Cold Weather and Housing Response Program.

In January, a total of eight Cold Weather Alerts were issued, with six localized to the District of Nipissing Social Services Administration Board's Cold Weather and Housing Response Program.

Facilities Operations

North Bay

- Conducted the annual fire systems maintenance.

Parry Sound

- Implemented generator alerts to remotely notify the Facilities team when the generator is on or off.

Information Technology

- Rollout of the new Quality Improvement Report Service Desk system.
- Installed updates on all Sexual Health desktop devices.
- Provided staff training on Microsoft SharePoint and Teams.
- Launched Oral Health Curve iPad Forms, Communicable Disease Control laptop program refresh, and Program Administrative Assistant laptop refresh.

Human Resources

Occupational Health and Safety

A new procedure addressing Field Officer Safety has been developed to improve protection for field officers, such as Public Health Inspectors, from occupational health and safety hazards when visiting off-site field locations.

Professional Development

Our commitment to staff development is stronger than ever with the continued success of our Learning Together Circles. These peer-led sessions provide valuable informal learning opportunities, allowing staff to expand their knowledge in key areas while also building the teaching and facilitation skills of our Learning Together Circle Leads.

Recent Sessions Included:

- **Teams/SharePoint/OneDrive:** 17 staff members attended a follow-up session
- **Microsoft To Do:** 11 staff participated
- **Upcoming sessions** include further sessions on Microsoft To Do and Microsoft Planner to further support staff skill development.

Staffing

There has been no net increase in FTE of permanent positions.

Clinical Services

Communicable Disease Control

Outbreak Activity

Between December 31, 2024, and January 31, 2025, the Communicable Disease Control program managed 15 outbreaks in long-term care homes, retirement homes, other high-risk congregate living settings, and childcare settings. These included:

- 5 outbreaks caused by an unknown enteric illness
- 4 COVID-19 outbreaks
- 2 outbreaks caused by Influenza A
- 1 Norovirus outbreak
- 1 Human Rhinovirus/Enterovirus outbreak
- 1 Coronavirus OC43 outbreak
- 1 outbreak caused by an unknown respiratory illness

Influenza

Since the start of the 2024-2025 season, 40 cases of influenza have been reported, including 38 cases of influenza A and 2 cases of influenza B. As of January 30, 2025, localized influenza activity is present in the district.

Handwashing Project 3rd with Year Nursing Students

Children are particularly vulnerable to infections, especially common colds and stomach illnesses. Since 80% of common illnesses and infections are spread by hand contact, teaching children how to wash their hands properly is an important part of keeping them healthy.

Although children are taught the basic principles of hand washing very early in life, regular reinforcement helps develop lifelong healthy habits. Research shows that teaching children to wash their hands properly can reduce stomach illness, such as diarrhea, by approximately 30%.

The Communicable Disease Control program partnered with third-year nursing students from Nipissing University and Canadore College to deliver handwashing education and skill building sessions to elementary school students and children in childcare centres across the North Bay Parry Sound district. These sessions were conducted from January to April 2024, and again from September to November 2024.

Through this initiative, 798 students and childcare attendees across eight schools and four childcare centres learned about germs, how they spread, and the importance of proper handwashing to prevent illness.

The Communicable Disease Control program will continue to work with Canadore College 3rd year nursing students in 2025 to teach handwashing education to children in childcare centres. This ongoing partnership demonstrates reflects the Health Unit's mission to foster healthy communities through partnership, preparedness, prevention, promotion and protection to realize a healthy community for all.

Professional Practice

Professional Practice continues to support student learning and development in public health. This semester, 33 students, including Bachelor of Science in Nursing consolidation students, third-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing students in community placements, Bachelor of Education students, and Northern Ontario School of Medicine dietetic interns, are gaining valuable experience while contributing to public health workforce capacity.

Third-year BScN students are collaborating on projects with teams across the health unit on a variety of projects:

- Evaluating client resources with Healthy Families

- Collaborating on recommendations regarding collecting data from clients on the Social Determinants of Health with Planning and Evaluation
- Improving handwashing knowledge and skills in childcare settings with Communicable Disease Control
- Developing a sexual health education campaign targeting older youth with Healthy Schools.

In January, a Registered Nurse Prescribing Pilot project was launched in the Sexual Health program. The goal is to explore and evaluate if the expanded Registered Nurse scope of practice enhances access to sexual health services and reduces barriers for equity-seeking populations. Professional Practice is leading the pilot, which includes an evaluative component supported by Planning & Evaluation.

The outcomes from this pilot will inform future service delivery and will be shared with provincial public health and nursing partners, as we are one of the first Health Units in Ontario to pilot and evaluate RN prescribing.

Oral Health and Vision Screening

To reduce barriers for children and families and leverage existing partnerships, the Oral Health program has renewed its partnership with the North Bay Regional Health Centre for the provision of dental treatment within the operating room setting.

Children enrolled in the Healthy Smiles Ontario program who require dental surgery and are unable to travel outside of the district now have the option to receive their dental treatment with us at North Bay Regional Health Centre. Operating room bookings began in December, and to date, nine children has received care through this initiative.

This initiative aligns with our mission to foster healthy communities through partnership, preparedness, prevention, promotion, and protection.

Sexual Health

Throughout 2024, Public Health Nurses offered enhanced services within schools across the district. This ongoing initiative, delivered in partnership with designated secondary schools and school boards, aims to improve access to comprehensive sexual health care and support positive health outcomes for students.

Over the year, there were 581 interactions with a Public Health Nurse at secondary schools, including 52 booked appointments and 467 drop-in sessions.

By bringing services directly into schools, this initiative continues to reduce barriers to care and promote sexual health education and well-being among youth.

Harm Reduction Services

Clinical Information has officially been rebranded to Harm Reduction Services, to better reflect the all-encompassing client-based services (needle syringe program) and broader enhanced harm reduction work with community partners and agencies.

Since July 2024, the Health Unit has distributed an average of:

- **480 benzodiazepine testing kits** per month
- **540 fentanyl testing kits** per month
- **472 xylazine testing kits** per month

These drug testing kits were made available as a one-time offer by the Ontario Harm Reduction Distribution Program. Given the high demand and positive client feedback, sustainability planning will be considered to continue offering this important harm reduction tool once our allotment from the Ontario Harm Reduction Distribution Program is depleted.

Health Unit clients accessing safer substance use supplies have voiced their appreciation for the availability of these testing kits. Returning clients continue to request more kits and have shared various ways they use the information learned from testing their substances.

- **Fentanyl test strips** allow clients who intend to use a stimulant, such as cocaine or crystal meth, to check for the presence of Fentanyl or its analogues. If fentanyl is detected, clients may choose not to use the substance or ensure naloxone is on hand in case of toxicity or overdose.
- **Benzodiazepine testing** in drugs expected to be opioids, alerts to the cumulative risk of respiratory depression, and alerts clients that naloxone may only provide a partial reversal, as naloxone is effective only against opioids. This information allows clients to take steps to protect their physical safety in the case of prolonged unconsciousness due to benzodiazepines.

Vaccine Preventable Diseases

The Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA) is Ontario legislation that helps to protect school aged children from serious diseases designated under the Act. The designated diseases include:

- Measles
- Mumps
- Rubella
- Tetanus
- Diphtheria
- Polio

- Pertussis
- Meningococcal,
- Varicella (for those born in or after 2010)

As part of this legislation, secondary school students who were overdue for their vaccines or did not have an exemption were suspended on January 15, 2025. In total, 242 secondary school students in the district were suspended for non-compliance with ISPA.

Leading up to the suspension date and throughout the suspension period, we work closely with the school community to reduce barriers to immunization so that students can return to school as soon as possible.

In March 2025, elementary school students who are overdue for required vaccines will also face suspension. In the lead-up to March, we continue to offer both appointment and walk-in services to children and their families seeking to catch up on overdue vaccines.

Community Services

Environmental Health

Preparations for the summer season are underway as the Environmental Health program collaborates with farmers' market organizers to determine whether certain markets in the district are exempt from portions of the regulation. This information will be added to the database, alongside other recurring community events, in the district, enabling public health inspectors to track information on these events more efficiently. The enhancements made in the database will aid public health inspectors in delivering summer community event inspections, thereby promoting a safer and healthier community.

The Health Unit website now features a new online notification form for operators to inform the Environmental Health program of their intent to open a seasonal pool or spa. With growing demand for online accessibility, this update provides community members with an additional, convenient option for submitting notifications.

Healthy Families

Perinatal mood and anxiety disorder is the term used to describe distressing feelings that can occur during pregnancy and up to one year postpartum. These perinatal mood and anxiety changes can affect anyone, including mothers, fathers, birth parents, and partners.

Impact of Untreated Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorder:

- Associated with adverse perinatal outcomes such as preterm birth, low birth weight, and poor infant development (Dama MH, Van Lieshout RJ., 2024).
- Postpartum depression and anxiety are the most common maternal complications of pregnancy (Provincial Council for Maternal and Child Health, 2021).

Rates of self-reported perinatal mood and anxiety disorder in the North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit region are significantly higher than the Ontario average ([Maternal Health Snapshot | Public Health Ontario](#)).

The Health Unit is a member of the Nipissing Parry Sound Perinatal Mood & Anxiety Disorder Network, which works to:

- Increase public awareness of perinatal mood and anxiety disorder
- Promote perinatal mental health services for treatment and recovery, and
- Provide educational opportunities for social and health care providers

A key priority for 2025 is to increase system integration and capacity through the development of a Nipissing Parry Sound Perinatal Mental Health Referral Pathway, improving access to care for affected families.



References:

Dama MH, Van Lieshout RJ. Perinatal Depression: A Guide to Detection and Management in Primary Care. J Am Board Fam Med. 2024 Jan 5;36(6):1071-1086.

Provincial Council for Maternal and Child Health. (2021). *Perinatal Mental Health: Guidance for the identification and management of mental health in pregnant or postpartum individuals*. https://www.pcmch.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/PCMCH-Perinatal-Mental-Health-Guidance-Documents_July2021.pdf

Public Health Ontario. (2024, September 27). *Maternal Health Snapshot*. Retrieved January 31, 2025, from <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/Data-and-Analysis/Reproductive-and-Child-Health/Maternal-Health>

Healthy Living & Healthy Schools

On January 13, the Healthy Schools and Healthy Living teams officially merged, taking a significant step toward a more integrated approach to health promotion across the lifespan. The newly combined team has met to discuss the transition and collaboratively plan next steps. Staff input is being gathered to develop a new program name that reflects a shared vision and goals.

Planet Youth Nipissing

[Planet Youth Nipissing](#) is one of three successful communities in Ontario to receive funding through the Public Health Agency of Canada's Youth Substance Use Prevention Program.

Key Updates:

- A consultant has been hired to develop a comprehensive communication and engagement strategy to enhance community outreach.

Current engagement efforts include:

- New [Facebook page](#) launched for public awareness
- Pop-up event held in West Nipissing on February 20, to engage the community
- Microgrant initiative: 20 local groups have applied for funding to implement prevention activities for youth, family, or schools that respond to the Planet Youth data.
- Partnership with Nipissing University: Progress continues evaluating microgrant activities and recruiting a research associate.

Organizational Effectiveness

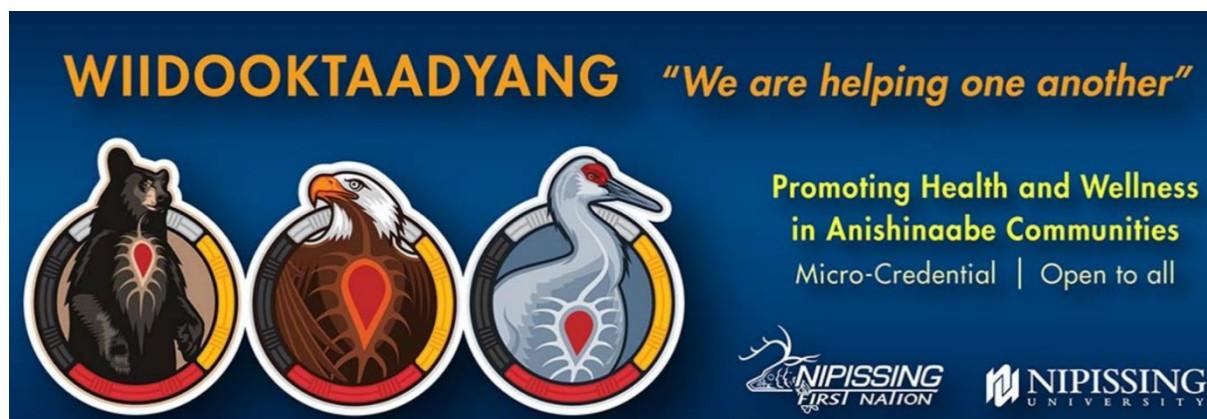
Indigenous Engagement

Wiidooktaadyang Micro-Credential

As part of the work related to Priority 2, Strategy 2 of the 2024-27 Strategic Plan - *Foster Mino-Bimaadiziwin (the good life) with Indigenous partners, communities, and individuals*, all members of the workgroup are undertaking professional development together. Currently, the group is in the process of completing the micro-credential *Wiidooktaadyang* (We are Helping One Another)- Promoting Health and Wellness in Anishinaabe Communities (<https://www.nipissingu.ca/academics/extended-learning/wiidooktaadyang>).

The micro-credential was created through a collaboration between Nipissing First Nation and Nipissing University. "The overarching objective of the three-module course is to facilitate the learning of anyone who seeks to promote health and wellness in Anishinaabe communities. Learners will leave the course with an understanding of Indigenous peoples' health, culture as a foundation of care, and engagement with practical learning to promote wholistic health and wellness as priority in their work with Indigenous peoples".

This learning will be instrumental in developing a shared understanding for members of the workgroup and support them in shaping the direction for the strategic plan, as well as future work within their individual programs.



Communications

- Programs have submitted contributions for the 2024 Public Annual Report, which is scheduled for release during Canadian Public Health Week, in April 2025.
- Communications is working with Planning and Evaluation and Healthy Living/Healthy Schools on a platform to share data with community partners, promoting a preventative approach to mental health challenges in local communities.
- Communications is supporting the HIV urgent response group to promote the availability of self-testing kits, wound care kits, and harm reduction supplies in Parry Sound, in coordination with the launch of Our Healthbox in North Bay.

Planning and Evaluation

Population Health Assessment & Surveillance

- An internal infectious disease dashboard is under development. The dashboard currently includes rates of diseases of public health significance for the Health Unit region and Ontario, calculated by year and disease.
- In the summer of 2024, the Health Unit distributed a survey to community partners for feedback on the Nipissing Parry Sound Overdose Reporting System. Based on the results, it was decided to rename the system to Nipissing Parry Sound Overdose Early Warning System. This new name better reflects the system's purpose: providing timely, early warnings about the drug supply responsible for overdoses in our district. Additionally, minor changes were made to the dashboard, including removal of two years' worth of historical data (2019 and 2020) to prevent the tables and other graphics from being cluttered, giving a clearer understanding of what the tables and other graphics are stating.
Click [here](#) to view the Nipissing Parry Sound Overdose Early Warning System.
- A summary report of all health unit driven investigations into poly- or perfluoroalkylated substances (PFAS) and the potential effects on kidney-related cancers has been completed. The report includes a summary of results from Ontario Health who assisted

in investigating kidney related cancer rates among residents of North Bay with municipal water.

Health Equity

- Twenty-nine organizations in our district, serving priority populations, received funding from the Health Unit to support health equity specific professional development for staff and/or volunteers. This funding supported training from September and December 2024 in areas such as homelessness, mental health, trauma informed care, 2SLGBTQ+ positive spaces, decolonization and Indigenous cultural awareness.

Effective Public Health Practice

- The Muskoka, Nipissing and Parry Sound Data Collaborative has published the first domain - [Social Determinants of Health](#) - of a community health and well-being dashboard, developed in collaboration with the Muskoka, Nipissing and Parry Sound Child and Youth Planning Table. Additional domains will be released throughout 2025, with the next set of indicator measures focusing on adverse childhood experiences.

Strategic Planning

- Mobilization of the 2024-2027 [Strategic Plan](#) is well underway. Strategy workgroups are developing their work plans based on a planning pathway guidance document. Workgroups will report progress on the first two stages, assess and recommend, at the end of February. These stages involve gaining a deeper understanding of the scope and context of each strategy (assess) and analyzing evidence to develop goals and outcomes (recommend).
- Programs and teams have been actively engaged in activities related to Priority 3, Strategy 1 - *Ground actions and relationships in our vision, mission, and values (VMV)*. This strategy focuses on integrating VMV into our organizational culture. Recently, a collective art piece was created to showcase our vision of *A Healthy Community For All*. The next activity under this strategy will be a photo contest to visually represent our refreshed vision, mission and values.