

February 12, 2021

Dear Division of Family Practice Physician Leads and Executive Directors,

Starting very soon, B.C. will fully embark on a provincial **COVID-19 vaccination campaign** that will be larger and more complex than anything we have ever done before.

On February 11th the GPSC had an opportunity to hear updates from Dr. Penny Ballem (BC Immunization Executive Lead) and Corrie Barclay (Assistant Deputy Minister, Health Sector IMIT Division) regarding the provincial COVID-19 vaccination planning and approach, and the provincial IT platform being developed for supporting this provincial effort. The update was followed by a discussion with the GPSC members, including Division of Family Practice regional physician representatives and Health Authority partners about the provincial vaccine rollout and the role of primary care. Below you will find a summary of the meeting which provides important information on the campaign and the role of divisions and physicians.

How is the provincial planning being done?

Due to its size and complexity, the planning for this campaign will be done in a different way than was the case for the flu immunization in the fall. The goal is to get as much of the population vaccinated as quickly as possible while we continue to manage the pandemic.

During the next few months, the emphasis will be on a centrally coordinated and carefully managed mass immunization approach led through Health Authorities, along with provincial record keeping and a streamlined digital record keeping platform. In urban centers, vaccines will be delivered in large public venues. Smaller communities may see vaccines delivered from physicians' offices.

There are compelling reasons for this provincial approach.

- The **scale of this campaign** is unlike anything we have ever undertaken before. It is essential that the vaccines, once available, be administered as systematically and efficiently as possible.
- The two vaccines currently approved, while very effective, have **complex cold storage and handling issues**. They each require 2 doses to be administered, which necessitates an additional level of coordination. The Pfizer vaccine, in particular, also requires very special handling.
- There is a need for **consistency in approach to ensure equitable distribution** of the vaccines across the province in keeping with the phased approach outlined by the Provincial Health Officer.
- We need a **comprehensive digital record** of who has received their vaccine and when. A provincial platform will track inventory, allow pre-registration and scheduling, and will ensure that we know exactly who is being immunized and when they will need their second doses. With this vaccine, there is massive scrutiny: the federal government – which is providing us with the vaccine – requires daily updates on how many vaccines have been administered.

What role will Divisions of Family Practice, local family physicians and primary care clinics play?

Primary care will continue to play a foundational role in providing care to patients in our communities, and in ensuring the health care system continues to have capacity to meet patient needs during the pandemic. Partnerships developed through PCNs and between primary care, Divisions of Family Practice, Health Authorities, and public health through the COVID-19 fall and spring planning and implementation have been crucial for our success and you should be proud of what you have been able to achieve. Family doctors and teams have been working very hard and these relationships and structures remain critical in ensuring success in the upcoming broad COVID-19 immunization campaign.

Health Authorities will reach out to divisions to seek advice and input, especially on a community level; however, planning and decision-making will be led by the provincial government, Immunize BC and health authorities. Broader community organizations will be engaged in helping to identify venues and offering logistic or operations support in some of these mass clinics.

Health Authorities will soon seek out doctors who can make themselves available on a scheduled basis at the vaccine venues to help deliver the huge volumes of vaccines. Many others will be involved in vaccine administration, and doctors may also be asked to provide oversight of patients in the immunization clinics.

At this time, with the exception of some smaller communities, family practices will not be asked to administer the vaccines in their clinics. It will be much later in the process before clinics or community pharmacies are broadly used in urban areas. For this to happen, we need vaccines that do not require the same special considerations for handling ideally require only one dose, and the provincial reporting system will need to be fully in place. In the meantime, practices are encouraged to continue work on identifying their panel and reaching out as needed to their elderly and vulnerable patients.

How are family practices going to be supported through the immunization campaign?

You will need to have accurate and up to date information, both about the vaccines and the process, in order to be able to confidently address your patients' questions and concerns. At the GPSC meeting, we heard a lot about the need for collating and developing tools and materials to help you raise awareness of the importance of the vaccine, answer patient questions, and address vaccine hesitancy. The [Doctors of BC COVID-19 Toolkit](#) contains sample messaging and FAQs, and it will continue to be updated regularly. We also know that practices will be fielding a lot of calls. A central call center will be set up within the next few weeks, in addition to an online booking system for people to register and book.

How will the public learn about the vaccination?

We know that patients look to their health care providers for reliable information. Divisions, family physicians and nurse practitioners will play a critical role in supporting patients with information and advice about the vaccine, monitoring for adverse reactions, and helping with understanding of the immunization planning and process.

This will not be just left up to primary care practices and their teams. We have heard that considerable attention will be paid to public and community messaging, in addition to using role models and faith communities, helping to ensure culturally relevant approaches and materials. There will be an inclusion agenda to get leaders of diverse communities to help with both vaccine hesitations, increasing confidence in the vaccine, and mobilizing the public.

We will provide more information as details about the immunization campaign become available. We look forward to working with you to deliver vaccines to millions of British Columbians so that our province can turn the tide of this pandemic.

Ted Patterson &
Dr. Anthon Meyer

Co-Chairs, General Practice Services Committee