

Public Health in the News

Aamir Bharmal and Fareen Karachiwalla (Toronto)

1) Alberta makes naloxone available without prescription

Take-home naloxone kits will be available at pharmacies in Alberta starting tomorrow. Alberta is now the 2nd province to offer take-home naloxone kits without a prescription. British Columbia was the first province to start this initiative in March 2016.

Alongside this announcement, the province aims to enhance drug treatment. Alberta Health Services has committed \$3 million to the Opioid Treatment Plan Strategy. The three-year project will expand counseling services and access to suboxone and methadone treatments, particularly in high-need areas.

2) Benefits of cycling and walking outweigh air pollution risk in cities

According to a study, only 1% of the cities in the world have levels of air pollution so high that cycling or walking would make someone's health worse.

"That's because physical inactivity is such a public health issue - it is not that pollution is not detrimental," said study author Audrey de Nazelle.

A UK Royal College of Physicians report on air pollution released earlier this year determined that 40,000 people die each year from lifetime air pollution exposure. Air pollution has become an increasing concern in major cities especially for those regularly exposed to it due to commuting to work.

The study authors add that while the research shows the benefits of physical activity in spite of air quality, further actions for combatting air pollution are needed. They call for further investment in infrastructure that supports active transportation.

3) Canada confirms first sexually transmitted Zika case

The Public Health Agency of Canada announced Monday that an individual from Ontario has contracted the Zika virus from a sexual partner who is believed to have contracted the virus while in one of the countries where the disease is actively circulating.

The confirmation is important because it's the first instance of person-to-person transmission of the Zika virus in Canada. To date, there are 55 confirmed cases of travel-related Zika virus acquired by Canadians visiting areas such as Central and South America. Two of those cases involve pregnant women.

Men who have visited a country affected by Zika are being told to use condoms throughout the duration of a partner's pregnancy or to wait six months before trying to conceive. Men are also being told to use condoms every time they have sex for six months after their return from a country affected by Zika.

Researchers don't yet know how often the Zika virus is transmitted between sexual partners or whether there is transmission when individuals are asymptomatic. About 80 per cent of those with the virus remain asymptomatic. Studies have shown that the virus can survive in a man's semen for up to 62 days.

4) Vaccine switched in 'milestone' towards ending polio

More than 150 countries have begun switching to a different polio vaccine - an important milestone towards polio eradication, health campaigners say.

The new vaccine will target the two remaining strains of the virus under a switchover 18 months in the planning.

There were just 74 cases of the paralyzing disease in 2015 and there have been 10 so far this year. All of the cases were in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Africa has been free of polio for more than a year.

Thousands of people will monitor the changeover in 155 countries during the next fortnight. It is taking effect mainly in developing countries, but also in richer ones such as Russia and Mexico. The new vaccine will still be given as drops in the mouth, so healthcare workers will not need fresh training.

It will no longer include a weakened version of type 2 polio virus, which was eradicated in 1999. "We don't need the type 2 component, as it's not in the world any longer. And in very rare cases it can mutate and lead to polio, through what's called circulating vaccine-derived virus".

The planning involved in the switchover has included dealing with a global stockpile of 100 million doses of vaccine targeting just type 2, built up as an insurance policy in case of any outbreak. The World Health Organization denied some media reports that "millions" of doses of the old vaccine would need to be destroyed, by incineration or other approved means.

5) Human rights tribunal orders Ottawa to ensure services for aboriginal kids

The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal is ordering the federal government to immediately enact a policy that would provide services to aboriginal children to ensure their health and welfare doesn't get caught up in red tape.

The policy is named after Jordan River Anderson, a five-year-old boy with complex needs who died in hospital in 2005 after a protracted two-year battle between the federal and Manitoba governments over his home care costs.

The decision means the government will have to spend more money in order to provide a level of services to First Nations children comparable to those offered by the provincial system