

Mandating Vaccine Receipt in a Return to Campus Plan is Premature

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As Canada passes the 50% mark with people having received at least one dose of the vaccine—but only about 4% of them with two-doses and therefore deemed fully vaccinated—and with more supply flowing in, it seems that we are at the threshold of returning to some normalcy. That normalcy includes allowing ourselves the possibility of returning to the USask campus in the fall, to work, to learn and serve, the way we all did before.

Working from home, teaching and learning through online platforms, meetings conducted with colleagues who we often don't see even on our screen, and countless other disruptions and workarounds have been hard these past 15 months. Vaccines have given us real hope that we could put these workarounds behind us and gather as a community again.

Into this context enters the proposal to require vaccine receipt in

order to return to campus. On the surface this sounds like a reasonable ask, although for some, mandating anything goes against their grain and therefore will compel a reaction. However, when considered closely, the proposal is fraught with issues of enforceability, resistance, and the likelihood of a false sense of invincibility against a mutating virus.

Mandating vaccine receipts has been debated before the COVID-19 pandemic and in relation to various other diseases. The principle benefits of vaccines—vaccines protect you and also protect the groups and populations of which you are a part—are so solid that many believe that requiring a dose, then, is a no-brainer. Requirement, however, involves enforcement. Enforcing such a requirement as individuals go about their business in a geographically widespread and diverse university

campus such as ours is a logistical challenge. It can be done but not easily, especially as we realize that to keep the mutating virus at bay, we may need periodic booster shots, or that the immunity built by the vaccines is time limited.

As expected, the virus continues to mutate. As selection pressure works on the virus, some of the mutations give the virus an advantage. The variants are now dominant in new cases, and some of these will develop, as some have already, the ability to evade vaccine-induced immunity or to breakthrough protection. We know vaccine developers are anticipating these changes and are working to stay ahead of the variants. This is why a 'once-and-done' principle for vaccine administration will not apply to the new Coronavirus and why a vaccine mandate will be complicated to enforce and to monitor.

Vigilance and effort are better placed if we develop clear messages that situate vaccine receipts as a very important part of a multi-layered strategy for protecting all who are returning to our campus. This swiss-cheese approach to COVID-19 suppression—multiple

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layers of protection all aligned and working together to minimize infection getting through rather than relying on any one mitigation layer, however important—will need to include policy, environmental, and individual behavioural changes.

We have learned that the virus is transmitted not only via droplets but also via aerosolized particles that linger in the air for a duration and may even travel a distance. Given this, environmental changes such as installation of high-performance HEPA filters or updating HVAC systems becomes an essential complement to creating post-COVID environments. Public health is replete with examples of changes in the environment, such as in road design and in the products that we build, that keep everyone safe and healthy.

Extending the current wastewater surveillance to include targeted USask facilities, buildings and housing is another necessary step. The detection of viral copies in wastewater, including variants, gives us a sentinel signal of possible surges and clusters to come in these specific settings, and a lead-start to message and to then take necessary action that would minimize the damage. USask research-

ers were early adopters of the use of wastewater for COVID-19 surveillance. We need to build on that experience and capacity.

Capabilities and capacity for rapid testing and delivery of results (via texts) and support for quarantining must be prominent policy elements of a return to campus plan. As a country, and in our province, we have lagged in updating our testing tools and regimes. Our over-reliance on polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing must be updated with newer, effective rapid tests including those for variants. As we plan for and implement policies for a protracted 'détente' with the virus, we need a system of rapid detection and clear communication, followed by supported action, integrated into our response plan.

University campuses are congregated settings and we have learned the value of de-densification using various arrangements and environmental changes to minimize viral spread. We need to utilize the university calendar system in a manner to spread out the courses over a full academic year so we keep our classes small and nimble. We need

to set up temporary facilities (classrooms, dinning rooms) for students and faculty to interact outdoors, season permitting. Faculty and students need to be encouraged and supported to action ideas that will keep them safe and healthy. The University has never had to contemplate and then execute a plan to bring back close to 30,000 people during a pandemic. This requires unprecedented cooperation, creativity and patience from everyone at the university.

Sole reliance on vaccination and the immunization that it confers is premature and short-sighted. We are now much better off with an array of vaccines available, and more to come in the near future, than we were a year ago. However, we are not totally in the clear. The debate about whether we should mandate a vaccine receipt, or not, is currently misplaced. It is a distraction. Instead, we should be encouraging and educating everyone about getting their vaccine doses, and presenting a clear roadmap, with an array of complementary covid-19 counter-measures built-in, to return to campus safely, cohesively, and confidently.

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