

May 11, 2021

Dr. Robert Strang
Robert.Strang@novascotia.ca

Dear Dr. Strang;

Re: Frontline Health Care Workers Vaccines

During your briefing yesterday, you indicated frontline health care workers had every opportunity to access vaccinations prior to COVID-19 vaccines being made publicly available. By doing so, you appeared to place blame on the frontline workers themselves. I am sure that was not your intent, but unfortunately, your comments have the potential to inflame an already volatile situation among health care workers who are not properly vaccinated and are now being forced to be re-assigned to COVID units.

I was copied on an email you received yesterday from a nurse being re-assigned to one of these units. As her email suggests, you may not have a full and clear understanding of the problems with vaccine rollout for frontline health care workers. My staff have received numerous similar complaints from frontline workers.

The nurse's email reads as follows:

As an RN working on an acute care medicine unit in the Halifax Infirmary, I can confidently say that I was absolutely not offered the "opportunity" to be vaccinated in January, nor were my colleagues. We received the vaccine survey in mid March, and it was done on an age based rollout. I received a link to book my vaccine in April, and the link did not work. Shortly thereafter, the online booking process was abruptly shut down. After much effort and frustration on my part, I was finally able to book a vaccine appointment for my first dose in mid May.

We are now required to float to Covid positive units, and very few of us on my unit are fully vaccinated (only those who also work in LTC or the covid assessment units). The rest of us either have second doses booked for July and August or are still waiting for our first dose.

It is shameful and unacceptable that 5 months after the vaccine first became available in NS, there are still frontline healthcare workers who are waiting to be vaccinated. We deserve to have the full protection that the vaccine offers while we care for these patients, and it is wrong that we are being made to wait 4 months between doses, like the rest of the general public. It is also wrong for you to mislead the public into believing that we all were afforded the same opportunity in January, when this is simply not true. This made it seem as though we chose not to book our vaccines, when in reality, we have been begging for them."

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That nurse was not alone in her experience. We also heard from an LPN working at the Halifax Infirmary:

Our employer did not give me opportunity to get vaccinated until the 2nd week of March. I then filled out the survey 3 times before finally getting an appt for my 1st dose in April. My younger colleagues did not have the same opportunity. Once the age group was lowered for those in their 20s, it was only available for a few days when suddenly it was stopped. Many of our staff spent days calling and emailing in an attempt to get a vaccine, with no response. Many of my coworkers are young, new staff, who believe in the benefit of the vaccine and believe in all public safety measures you have lead them to believe in. Your response today appeared to shift the blame of not being vaccinated on them. It played on the idea that they are defiantly not getting vaccinated. It was disappointing, hurtful and disheartening to watch. It belittles and damages the public view of nurses.

While you can see that technical challenges prevented some from getting fully vaccinated, others still were hired after the opportunity for front-line workers had expired.

I have written Tracey Barbrick **twice** with possible resolutions to the re-assignment difficulties faced at the Halifax Infirmary. NSGEU staff have also worked with NSH to try and offer solutions. NSGEU and NSNU have advised the NSH that it could broaden its call for volunteers. We've advised NSH and government that they should immediately vaccinate covid unit health care workers who do not have both shots rather than have them wait the required 105 days, and we have shared our position that if staff are being re-assigned to COVID-positive units, fully-vaccinated staff must be deployed first, followed by those who have received one dose, with unvaccinated staff only considered as a last resort.

In yesterday's news conference, you did indicate the province was looking to move up vaccination schedules for these workers. I look forward to hearing the details of that plan as soon as possible, and again urge the government and NSH to ensure health care workers are not forced to work in COVID units until they are properly vaccinated.

In the meantime, I hope this gives you a better understanding that some health care workers did not simply refuse to get fully vaccinated, but were unable to do so.

Yours truly,



Jason MacLean
President

JML/lb

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