

Are We Almost There Yet?

Editorial

March 2021 (Vol. 53, No. 2)

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As I write, it's late February, and the vaccination program is under way. But it's off to a slow start. About three percent of Canadians have had the needle, a much lower number than in many countries. Meanwhile, classrooms are empty, lectures can take many hours to prepare, and we're all dodging local virus outbreaks that can shut a district down tightly.

The decision of a past government to buy vaccines from abroad rather than produce them locally paid off for many, more normal, years; and succeeding governments that could have reversed the decision did not see a need to do so. Perhaps it was hard to foresee a day when the American government would be ordering their businesses not to fulfil contracts with Canada until American needs had been met. Be that as it may, while as a nation we have options to buy more than sufficient quantities of coronavirus vaccine, we're behind the curve on delivery time.

And that's a problem for universities. The original schedule for vaccination called for the program to be more or less complete by September. A small improvement in that timing could make a return to normal campus life a possibility; the small delay that we are seeing in reality makes another semester of online classes seem almost certain.

Right now mainly older people are being vaccinated. It's not clear yet whether provinces will be prioritizing (say) thirty-year-olds over twenty-year-olds, or having an open season once the most vulnerable population has been protected. What is clear is that we will not have a significant proportion of the student population immunized until late in the process. Bringing several thousand retirees together in one spot may be safe by some point during the summer: bringing the same number of students together will, for a while, be much riskier.

And, of course, that's reckoning without the variant forms. We've seen several significant variants already, some of which appear to have a higher R number, and some of which appear to be more resistant to vaccines. The more people get infected worldwide, the more variants there will be. While world infection numbers turned the corner in January, there are still huge numbers of active cases, and we could still see several new strains, one or more of which could set vaccination programs back seriously.

If you think about the math for a moment, time is not on our side. The more people catch COVID-19 while the vaccination process is going on, the more chance that the game will change, almost certainly not in our favour. But the clock is not calibrated in days but in transmissions. The flatter we keep the curve now, the better the chance that the fall term will be our last in these trying circumstances. So be careful, stay well – and when it's your turn, get that vaccination!