

*On behalf of Nick Kates, Chair, Department of Psychiatry & Behavioural Neurosciences –*

**To All Members of the Department,**

I want to provide you with an update of some of the steps the department is currently taking as we deal with the impact of COVID-19 including, unfortunately, the cancellation of all Department events planned for the next three months.

We will continue to be guided by recommendations coming from the University and FHS, the postgraduate and undergraduate program leadership, SJH, HHS and Homewood, Public Health and other Government sources, who will provide direction for the actions we take. We would recommend visiting [McMaster's COVID-19 webpage](#) regularly and this includes links to other sites such as Public Health Ontario, WHO and Public Health Hamilton.

We have established a COVID-19 action team, led by myself and Bev Pindar-Donick who will be the people to contact in the Department with any questions you may have about any aspect (personal or professional) of the current situation. It includes our associate and vice chairs, hospital chiefs (including Homewood) the Directors of Postgrad (Hamilton and WRC) and Undergraduate Education and a resident representative. We will be meeting daily by phone to monitor and keep on top of the rapidly changing situation (this email has been updated 3 times since this morning). And two factors will drive all our decisions.

- a) The health and safety of all our learners, staff, faculty and patients.
- b) Our responsibility to do all we can to reduce the likelihood of any further spread to the wider community, however small that risk might be. "Social distancing" will be an essential part of every preventive plan.

At this time we are taking the following steps.

**Meetings and conferences**

- 1) All Department Rounds, presentations and major events have been cancelled. This includes Research Day, the Annual Update in Psychiatry (Review Course), next week's Brain Awareness Week presentation and the Cleghorn Lecture, as well as our weekly rounds.
- 2) All work meetings should now be conducted virtually, using Zoom, Skype, WebEx or even just email updates – unless attendees are already in the same building at that time.
- 3) We have purchased 10 licenses for Zoom and will increasingly utilize this for organizing meetings, or as an option for anyone unable to attend in person. We will also provide training and support to anyone wishing to use this platform.

**Travel**

- 4) Travel to any activity outside of Hamilton on behalf of the Department is now prohibited, wherever that event may be held.

- 5) There is also now a ban on all International work or study travel by McMaster students, unless they obtain a specific waiver from the University Provost or Department Chair.
- 6) While decisions about personal travel are obviously up to each individual, if you do choose to travel to an area that is not currently considered high risk, be aware that this designation is subject to change at any time and could delay travel home or require self-isolation on your return, as the Federal Government has just advised. It is very likely that all international travel will be determined as high risk in the very near future so, especially in the light of our responsibilities as frontline health professionals, we would urge you not to travel.
- 7) If you do travel, monitor your travel location for updated travel advisories and register. You are also asked to register your travel plans in advance at [fhstravel.mcmaster.ca](http://fhstravel.mcmaster.ca) before you leave and to notify your employee health and safety office at St. Joe's or HHS before you leave and immediately you return, and be guided by any recommendations they may make.
- 8) Any overseas students planning to start any training at McMaster should be told to postpone their travel and study plans until further notice.

#### **Self-care and Individual precautions**

- 9) Anyone who is feeling unwell or has any of the symptoms associated with COVID-19 should stay home and seek the appropriate medical assistance. You should also inform Employee Health / Occupational Health and Safety at SJH or HHS and McMaster Employee Health / Occupational Health as well as the lead for any program or activity in which you may have participated.
- 10) We would ask anyone who has concerns because they may be vulnerable themselves (e.g. pre-existing health condition, or undergoing specific kinds of treatment) or who is living with other family members or housemates who may be vulnerable, to be particularly careful.
- 11) McMaster has prepared a guide for supervisors which offers helpful advice for what they need to know about COVID-19 and the workplace. The guide can be found [here](#).
- 12) We want to stress the importance of:
  - a. Regular and thorough handwashing and hand cleansing. We will also be increasing the number of hand sanitizers that are available in all Department areas and adding signage.
  - b. Regular cleaning of high-touch surfaces including phones and tablets, electronics and door handles with regular household cleaners or diluted bleach (1 part bleach to 9 parts water) or just soap and water.

#### **Specific issues for learners**

- 13) All educational sessions for all learners will now be held remotely.
- 14) SJH are arranging extra mask fitting sessions, for residents and faculty so that they can get fitted or refitted for a mask.

15) In all situations related to the presence of residents, medical students, or other learners in clinical placements / settings we will be guided by decisions made by the leadership of those programs and follow their directives.

### **Communication**

- 16) We have developed a communication plan that will:
- a. Ensure everyone in the Department receives relevant information, as soon as possible, including through regular updates from the Chair.
  - b. Allow us to contact all members of the Department rapidly, in the event of an emergency using a “fan-out” method.
- 17) Groups or teams that wish to keep in regular contact may want to set up a WhatsApp group of its members.
- 18) We recommend that all physicians sign up with OTN. You should have received an email from the OMA about this earlier today. This can be used very easily for patient contacts.

### **Contingency planning**

- 19) We suggest you start planning now for how you would work if you were unable to come into the workplace or were placed in isolation, and what resources or materials you would need in your home and prepare these now.
- 20) We will be looking at all of the leadership roles in the department and identify who could fill these roles if, for any reason, the current incumbent was incapacitated or in isolation, recognizing that much of the day to day work can still be completed from home.
- 21) We will try to identify alternate locations where essential activities can take place if for any reason we are unable to use existing office space.

### **Research**

- 22) CIHR have stated that they will work with researchers to ensure that their projects are not affected by COVID-19 and will approve extensions to the ATUF period if delays occurred due to the virus. CIHR payments will continue as scheduled.
- 23) We are recommending that the testing of subjects be suspended until further notice.
- 24) We are also looking at other potential vulnerabilities such as research staff whose positions may be in jeopardy if the research has to be put on hold for a period of time.

Needless to say we hope that the situation will not become as serious as the one we need to prepare for, but regardless we want to do all we can to reduce the risks as early as possible.

If you have questions about any of this, at any time, please email me at [nkates@mcmaster.ca](mailto:nkates@mcmaster.ca) or call or text me at 905 536 0966.

Nick