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## Bruce Arthur: A new hotspot strategy for Ontario vaccines seems like a no-brainer. Will the Ford government make it happen?

**Date:** June 7, 2021

**From:** The Toronto Star (Toronto, Ontario)

**Publisher:** CNW Group Ltd. - Toronto Star Newspapers

**Document Type:** Article

**Length:** 1,020 words

**Content Level:** (Level 4)

**Lexile Measure:** 1240L

Full Text:

Byline: Bruce Arthur

For some in Ontario, Friday might be a real Friday this week. Maybe you will be on a patio, or in line behind people for a patio, as the European soccer championships blare. Maybe you'll have already stopped at your favourite small business, or spent the morning at an outdoor fitness class, or driven through the zoo. In some parts of Toronto, the city that has been fed more poorly executed lockdowns than almost any other, Ontario going to Stage 1 of reopening Friday could even look like a party.

And as long as households don't mix and people don't gather indoors and cases don't rise, that's great, since patios were not high on the things that needed to be closed in the first place. Toronto is due a chance to safely blow off some steam.

And not to be a dour soul at the party, but if Ontario can just reinstitute hotspot vaccinations along with reopening it would be the right thing to do, in every way.

"The worst-case scenario is you help some people out," says Dr. Isaac Bogoch, infectious diseases specialist at the University of Toronto and Toronto General Hospital, and a member of the province's vaccine task force. "There's no loser in this scenario."

There shouldn't be, anyway. Bogoch says he expects a version of reallocation by hot spot, versus per-capita vaccine distribution, to happen by the end of the week, but no public official has committed yet. In April the province belatedly boosted shipments to hot spots in Peel, Toronto and Scarborough for two weeks, and it was effective and just. But they stopped, and since then the relative rates of vaccination are slipping.

The fact that a renewal of the hotspot strategy still hasn't happened yet is baffling. It worked the first time, and the pattern of the pandemic - hot spots, then everyone - has been the same every time outside of long-term care. It's happening again with the more transmissible Delta variant.

"When it comes to the second dose, it becomes important because of what we think we know about the Delta variant," says Dr. Sharmistha Mishra, a scientist with the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute at St. Michael's Hospital and a member of the province's modelling consensus table. "They're hot spots for a reason, and those reasons have not changed."

There really isn't an argument against the strategy that isn't superficial twaddle, or uncaring gall. Yes, case counts are declining everywhere - a mere 95 in Peel was tremendous news, even on a typically low-test Monday - but Delta has been growing, and it's primarily been found in Peel and across the Golden Horseshoe. Yes, this government has eschewed the vulnerable at every turn, and tried to protect their voting base.

But one thing the province has failed to grasp on a truly epic scale in this pandemic is this simple truth: you protect the most vulnerable, and you protect everybody.

"When we don't treat communities as isolated from each other, and knowing communities are all connected, our contacts are not just limited particular given essential work and so forth, that we get a spillover benefit," said Mishra. "When vaccination and protection are resourced to communities seeing the highest risks, particularly given network densities and how many folks they come into contact

with, we actually protect everybody else. That spillover benefit can be quite large. And so it affects the epidemic trajectory, and very quickly it allows that spillover benefit &#8230; benefiting folks who don't live in hot spots.

"What we're projecting for the second-dose aspect is that at least a third of the benefit that we might accrue from accelerating our second-dose vaccination in hot spots, a third of that benefit will be in non-hot spots, moving forward."

Look, the province already closed schools for the rest of the year so that people could go shopping, which may not be the right choice, but it's a choice. Ontario has already dragged the province through all the ineffective lockdowns it could, or let this thing run.

But if the government wants any good times to keep rolling, there's still time for them to learn. We're really close here, and letting cases bloom to no societal benefit just because we can would be more of Ontario's signature callousness. Other than the Delta variant, the only impediment to escape velocity is our own impatience and stupidity.

And this reopening plan isn't dumb. It's just that without a hotspot strategy, it's incomplete. More resources to hyperlocal vaccination campaigns is the best path. We can do this.

"Across Peel, Toronto, Windsor, York, Ottawa, we're hearing the same things from the community leaders, which is we're starting to hit the wall on the easy, and we're starting to get into hard," says Sophia Ikura, the executive director of the Health Commons Solutions Lab at Sinai Health, who has been deeply involved with vaccination logistics at a community level. "Most systems do this: they reach 75 per cent and they say, done, we reached herd immunity. But if you can't see who didn't get vaccinated, you could have the same problem.

"Rexdale did 24,000 shots in the first week that those mobile clinics were running, and only 6,500 of them were Rexdale residents. Everyone else was just from everywhere else."

Ontario has mucked up its pandemic so precisely that almost nobody got what they wanted: if you are a parent, a child, a restaurateur, a small business owner, a small business enjoyer, a health-care worker, a long-term-care worker or resident, a senior, a vulnerable group, a fan of public health or almost anyone else, you have been kicked in the pants to varying degrees since September, at least. The people in charge made sure that most non-donors, at least, were all in it together.

Well, a party might be starting, and nobody wants to go back. So make sure we don't.

Bruce Arthur is a Toronto-based columnist for the Star. Follow him on Twitter: @bruce\_arthur

CAPTION(S):

Lineups last month at a pop-up at the Toronto Zoo in Scarborough, hosted by the Scarborough Health Network.

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**Source Citation** (MLA 8th Edition)

"Bruce Arthur: A new hotspot strategy for Ontario vaccines seems like a no-brainer. Will the Ford government make it happen?"

*Toronto Star* [Toronto, Ontario], 7 June 2021, p. NA. *Gale In Context: Canada*,

link.gale.com/apps/doc/A664449475/CIC?u=utoronto\_main&sid=bookmark-CIC&xid=ba196380. Accessed 14 July 2021.

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A664449475