

Highlights from the February Medical Officer of Health Report to the Board of Health

Medical Officer of Health Update

In my update last month to the North Bay Parry Sound Board of Health, I described some of the Health Unit programs that promote health and prevent illness, thereby reducing health care costs. This month I would like to focus on why it is more important than ever to invest in public health.

In Canada, life expectancy has increased by more than 28 years between 1920 and 2020¹. Most of these gains were achieved through public health measures such as vaccination programs and improved sanitation which decreased the spread of infectious diseases. Medical advances including antibiotics and improvements in maternal and infant care have also contributed to increases in the life span.

However, gains in life span have outpaced gains in health span. By 2040, the number of adults over the age of 30 with a major illness requiring significant hospital care, is expected to reach one in four, doubling from one in eight in 2002². The number of people living with at least one chronic condition is also expected to increase by two million in the next 15 years. The aging population is the biggest factor influencing these trends, though **structural and social determinants of health**, and chronic disease risk factors shaped by these determinants will also play a significant role.

***Social determinants of health** refer to a specific group of social and economic factors that relate to an individual's place in society, such as income, education, employment, racism, social connections, and access to services.*

*The **structural determinants of health** are the written and unwritten rules that create, maintain, and eliminate the long-lasting patterns of advantage and disadvantage between socially constructed groups that impact health.*

¹ Statista (website) [Canada: life expectancy 1800-2020| Statista](#) Accessed Feb. 12, 2026.

² Rosella LC, Buajitti E, Daniel I, Alexander M, Brown A. (2024) *Projected patterns of illness in Ontario*. Toronto, ON: Dalla Lana School of Public Health.

The impacts of an aging population and increasing rates of chronic disease are already being felt by the health care system in Ontario. Challenges such as difficulty in accessing a family physician, emergency department wait times, and hallway medicine frequently make the headlines. Ontario’s Minister of Finance, Peter Bethlenfalvy has recently characterized health spending as “unsustainable”,³ yet demand will continue to increase given the projected chronic disease trends.

We need to think differently about health spending. While efficiencies should be sought, we must also invest in increasing the population’s health span to reduce the demand on the health care system. Aging is historically associated with increased burden of chronic disease and a decline in quality of life, but research is indicating that this is not inevitable⁴. Chronic diseases are largely caused by modifiable risk factors such as smoking, drinking alcohol, poor nutrition, and being sedentary⁵.

Examining the health of young people can give us a glimpse into our future. National data indicates that in the past 15 years there has been a decrease in the use of alcohol and cigarettes by 12-17-year-olds⁶. However, fewer of these students (21%) met Canadian physical activity recommendations in 2022-2024 as compared to 2018-2019 (36%).⁷ In 2023, 18% of Ontario Grade 7 to 12 students reported fair or poor physical health, among the highest reported since monitoring through the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) began decades ago.⁸ Self-rated mental health has also significantly worsened since monitoring began in 2007. Local data from the 2024 Planet Youth Nipissing Survey found similarly low levels of physical activity and self-reported good or very good physical (50%) and mental (37%) health among Grade 10 students⁹.

These findings indicate an urgent need to change our population approach to health.

³ [Ontario finance minister says rate of health-care spending is ‘unsustainable’ | Globalnews.ca](#) Accessed February 17, 2026.

⁴Chatterji S, Byles J, Cutler D, et al. (2015) Health, functioning, and disability in older adults – present status and future implications. *Lancet* 385(9967):563-575.

⁵ Ng R, Sutradhar R, Yao Z, Wodchis WP, Rosella LC. (2020) Smoking, drinking, diet and physical activity – modifiable lifestyle risk factors and their associations with age to first chronic disease. *Int J Epidemiol.* 49(1):113-130.

⁶ Health Canada (2025) Alcohol and drug use among students in Canada 2023-24. [Alcohol and Drug Use among Students in Canada, 2023–24](#) Accessed February 18, 2026.

⁷ Statistics Canada. Directly measured physical activity and sedentary time in Canada: New results from the Canadian Health Measures Survey, 2022 to 2024. [The Daily — Directly measured physical activity and sedentary time in Canada: New results from the Canadian Health Measures Survey, 2022 to 2024](#) Accessed February 18, 2026.

⁸ Boak, A., & Hamilton, H. A. (2024). The mental health and well-being of Ontario students, 1991–2023: Findings from the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS). Toronto, ON: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

⁹ Planet Youth Nipissing. [Planet Youth Nipissing Homepage](#) – Accessed Feb. 18, 2026.

Public health plays a vital role in identifying and collaborating on provincial and community strategies that alter risk factors and strengthen protective factors on a population level. Strategic investments in the social determinants of health and supportive physical, social, and economic environments are critical to promoting healthy aging¹⁰ and to preserving the long-term sustainability of the health system.

Investing in population health is essential - it is one of the most effective levers we have to decrease the cost of health care. In Ontario, over 40% of the total budget is directed to health spending¹¹, while less than 2% of health spending is invested in public health¹². This imbalance limits our ability to prevent chronic disease and reduce avoidable demand on the health care system. Now more than ever, strategic investments in population-level prevention and the social determinants of health are required to shift this dynamic. Strengthening prevention today will reduce hospitalizations, improve quality of life, and help ensure the sustainability of Ontario's health system for future generations.

Program and Services Highlights

Oral Health

- Oral Health has been reaching out to community partners who work closely with priority populations to improve navigation of federal and provincial dental programs and reduce barriers to care through better access and coordinated support.

Sexual Health and Harm Reduction

- In January, two public health nurses from the Sexual Health and Harm Reduction program delivered a lunchtime talk to primary care providers in the Parry Sound area. The session focused on local and provincial case trends and updated management and treatment recommendations for sexually transmitted infections. A similar talk is planned for North Bay in the near future.

Vaccine Preventable Diseases

- Increased uptake of optional vaccines such as Hepatitis B and HPV-9 was achieved through identifying eligible students using an enhanced analytics tool, issuing immunization notices, and offering optional secondary school vaccine clinics.

¹⁰ Gianfredi V, Nucci D, Pennisi F, Maggi S, Veronese N, Soysal P. Aging, longevity, and healthy aging: the public health approach. *Aging Clin Exp Res.* 2025 Apr 17;37(1):125.

¹¹ Government of Ontario. [2025 Ontario Budget | In Brief](#) (accessed February 18, 2026)

¹² Ontario Ministry of Health. [Published plans and annual reports 2025–2026: Ministry of Health | ontario.ca](#) (accessed February 18, 2026)

Environmental Health

- The beginning of the year marks an annual “reset” for all inspected facilities.
- Food premises each undergo a risk assessment to their risk category. The risk rating determines the frequency of routine inspections for that facility.
- The Health Unit is enhancing the public disclosures system on our website. Online disclosure for tobacco, vapour, and smoke enforcement actions is now displayed on the [enforcement disclosure page](#), with additional program areas to follow.

Healthy Families

- An infant feeding survey is being conducted to understand the feeding practices of infants in their first 6 months across the Health Unit. Participation began in March 2025, and over half of the 274 surveys needed to generate reliable data have been collected to date.

Indigenous Engagement

- The Giiwedno Mshkikiwgamig (North Bay Indigenous Hub) presented the Health Unit with a beautiful piece of artwork during a Letters of Relationship celebration. The Letter of Relationship affirms a shared vision of building safe, inclusive, and culturally respectful pathways for Indigenous community members. The Health Unit also received a plaque from the North Bay Indigenous Hub recognizing the organization’s commitment for all staff to complete Anishinaabe Mino’ Ayaawin – *People in Good Health* training. This training supports the Health Unit in reconciliation efforts and in providing culturally safe care. The artwork and plaque are prominently displayed beside front reception at the North Bay office.

Effective Public Health Practice

- Foundational Services is supporting a Quality Improvement project to develop consistent, reliable, and cost-effective processes for transporting supplies and other items between Health Unit offices and private water sample drop-off locations.