

REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE

The failure of Ontario public health messaging and how vaccine hunters Canada stepped up

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Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has created an immeasurable amount of pain and suffering across the globe. In Canada, the development and procurement of COVID-19 vaccines in a short period was hailed as a light at the end of the tunnel; however, getting the vaccines into the arms of Canadians was proven to be another challenge due to inconsistent vaccine supplies, varied eligibility criteria across Canada's different public health units, and misinformation about the different vaccines. Ontario initially lagged behind many provinces in vaccine distribution. When adults (age 18 years and older) were eligible, it was nearly impossible to book a vaccine since the system was poorly organized that it led to long wait times [1,2,3]. Waiting hours to book a vaccine through the provincial portal was frustrating, especially when available dates were quickly getting booked up and the provincial booking site was crashing. The process of booking vaccines for our grandparents and parents was proven to be difficult as there were numerous barriers associated with navigating the online portals independently. This led to many receiving a later appointment date despite the increased vulnerability. Furthermore, the province failed to provide clear and timely updates on the vaccine rollout plan [4,5]. They also made contradictory statements leaving the public confused, leading to a greater spread of COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation [4,5].

Due to the frustration many individuals faced regarding Ontario's vaccine roll out, Vaccine Hunters Canada, a volunteer-based initiative was created to help Canadians get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Andrew Young initially started this volunteer-based community within Ontario to get individuals vaccinated, however, it quickly expanded across the nation [6]. Vaccine Hunters Canada stepped up when the province of Ontario and different public health units failed to make the vaccine booking system accessible. Vaccine Hunters Canada helped Canadians through numerous social media platforms such as Discord and Twitter, an online group chat/forum to broadcast vaccine information. At its peak, the organization had about 427,000 followers across its platforms [6]. Volunteers answered questions about eligibility and safety, but most importantly, they chased down, in real-time, the elusive whereabouts of vaccine doses. The Ontario government should have stepped up to increase accessibility with booking vaccine doses; however, it was through an independent, nonpartisan, volunteer-run community that enabled us and many community members to get their vaccines.

While Ontario public health news failed to engage with the public about vaccine access, Vaccine Hunters Canada filled in the gap. They played a crucial role in informing Ontarians about the urgency of being vaccinated. This was particularly evident around April 2021 to June 2021 when the first dose was made available during Phase 2 of the vaccine roll out [7]. Phase 2 involved mass deliveries of vaccines distributed through mass immunization clinics and mobile teams to reach high-risk congregate settings, essential workers and people living in hot spot communities [7].

We, the authors, felt the mix of anxiousness and urgency to receive our vaccines as individuals living in hot spot communities. This was when we started to see more activity from Vaccine Hunters Canada through Twitter and Discord to address the increased amount of eligible people. We turned on our notifications from their account to get immediate updates on open clinics in certain postal codes, mass immunization clinics, and availability of leftover vaccines. Not only did we use Vaccine Hunters Canada, but it became a collective effort among our peers to inform each other and book vaccines using the links provided. Vaccine Hunters Canada's operations through their social media presence, quick updates, and interactive approach developed a strong sense of community amongst Canadians in seeking and obtaining their COVID-19 vaccines. Despite the stress throughout the pandemic and miscommunication or lack thereof from the Ontario government, Vaccine Hunters Canada proved to be a reliable source of information for many Canadians.

For future steps, in the case of a public health crisis, we should all keep in mind the importance of communication and community. The collective efforts of people to be informed and vaccinated, is the most effective way to control the situation and to prevent the spread of disease. Whether it is the government or a grassroots organization, such as Vaccine Hunters Canada, the ability to connect with the public through media can have a huge influence on the public's health perceptions and outcomes. With the ever-growing use of social media and its utilization in the healthcare space, it has become apparent that there is great value in creating an engaging space for social media users to receive health information. When using social media, it is important to be mindful of who receives the information, what impact the messaging has, and what changes in health behaviour and health outcomes can happen with the interventions [8]. Vaccine Hunters Canada ensured that the public, especially Discord and Twitter users, were able to receive information in a clear, concise, and timely manner. The various channels on the Discord app were managed

by bots and dedicated volunteers to prevent the spread of misinformation and spam messages. Twitter was also an effective way to spread information about the vaccine rollout, especially through the retweet function that reached greater amounts of individuals beyond their followers. Through their outreach, they made an impact on informing the general public about vaccine accessibility. This resulted in changes in health behaviours and outcomes in which the Ontario public became more active in seeking vaccines thus improving the provincial vaccination coverage. We are truly grateful for the immense efforts that the Vaccine Hunters Canada team has provided for Canadians. Amidst the conflict and confusion between us, the public, and them, the Ontario government, throughout the pandemic, Vaccine Hunters Canada have demonstrated that it is not about "us versus them" but rather "us versus the disease."

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