

COVID-19

**Addition to vaccine priority list corrects 'huge inequity': Expert**

Dr. Simon Sherry, Dalhousie University professor of psychology and neuroscience, applauds the physicians behind the change to the priority list.

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**Savannah Awde | Legislature Bureau**

Public Health updated its original list of medical conditions prioritized for a COVID-19 vaccine to include severe mental illness, a move some experts say is part of correcting "huge inequity" in medicine.

That change was made in "late March" after "consultation with specialist physicians," Public Health spokesperson Shawn Berry said.

"As the eligibility is for a patient who has been directed by their primary care provider or specialist, these physicians would recommend vaccination to the patient," Berry said.

For those without access to a primary care provider, Berry noted there is a declaration form a person in the category can fill out.

"Anyone self-identifying should be prepared to provide documentation, for example: the name of the chronic care clinic they attend, prescriptions, upcoming appointments or other supporting information for their selected conditions," he said.

Berry did not return requests about which group of doctors approached Public Health about the change.

But Dr. Simon Sherry, Dalhousie University professor of psychology and neuroscience, applauds the physicians behind the change.

"I'm glad to see that mental illness is being recognized in a manner equivalent to other serious mental illnesses. It's a small but important step in equal treatment and de-stigmatizing mental illness," he said.

"I also think it's very important to reference a wider research literature that suggests those with pre-existing mental health problems have had a particularly difficult time during our pandemic."

The New Brunswick Medical Society did not ask for the addition, president Dr. Jeff Steeves said in a statement, but added the society supports it.

Public Health did not provide the rationale for the change, but Mary Ann Campbell, psychology professor University of New Brunswick, said people with severe mental illness can be prone to "functional challenges" and lifestyle that can increase risk of exposure.

"Some people who have severe mental health issues will have difficulty sometimes with decision making, problem-solving," she said.

"They may also have to see a lot of different care providers as part of their care, whether that's helping with their basic living needs or treatment and things like that, it means they're coming and going from different facilities and professional offices a lot."

Campbell also noted heightened effects of the pandemic on those with mental illness, citing University of British Columbia and Canadian Association of Mental Health data.

"You've got 60 per cent of people with pre-existing mental health conditions prior to COVID taking hold of us are experiencing worsening mental health because of COVID," she said.

"It's not necessarily going to be corrected or fixed by having the vaccine sooner than other people, but it certainly helps mitigate their worry and concern once they have the vaccine in terms of what the virus may do should they contract it."

Sherry added there is emerging research on the effects of long-term alcohol misuse and COVID vulnerability.

But making those with severe mental illness eligible might not be enough, Sherry said.

"There are some enormously capable humans in this world with severe forms of mental illness. But depending on the phase of your illness ... Maybe you're going to need some additional support and information," he said.

Sherry noted schizophrenia as an example.

"A basic mistrust is often part of the experience of psychosis. And we're asking people in unprecedented ways to trust governments, and doctors, and science," he said.