

Health doc reverses stand on visitors to Muskoka

'There hasn't been an overburdening of the health care system here'

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Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit medical officer of health Dr. Charles Gardner. - Andrew Mendler/Torstar

MUSKOKA — After publicly leading a campaign to urge cottagers to stay away from Simcoe Muskoka at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in April, the chief medical officer of health for the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit has softened his stance.

At that time, [Dr. Charles Gardner was communicating](#) with his provincial counterpart, Dr. David Williams, to recommend people from the Greater Toronto Area not visit secondary residences for fear of spreading the novel coronavirus through community contact.

In recent days, with infection rates dropping, and a move by the province to reactivate cottage rentals, Dr. Gardner is now comfortable having visitors come to the region.

“For a long time now, I had been taking the position that people shouldn’t be using their secondary residences,” he stated in a media update on Tuesday, June 16. “My concern at the time was the potential to have people emerge as cases at their cottage and potentially burden or overwhelm the health-care system. We have been very fortunate that hasn’t happened. There hasn’t been an overburdening of the health-care system here,” he offered.

Dr. Gardner pointed to ever-improving conditions as a reason to take a measured approach to welcome a return of visitors.

“I have not seen evidence of (visitor) transmission here,” he explained. “The level of transmission has started to come down in municipalities south of here.”

He said with all those factors having people from outside the area rent cottages and use facilities such as beaches is going to be part of the new normal of life with coronavirus.

“So we are learning to live with this virus,” said Dr. Gardner. “The province has also allowed people to rent cottages or secondary residences. With those changes we have now moved as a health unit to merely advise people when they use their cottages they should be practicing the physical distancing, maintaining themselves at the cottages for the most part being very careful about going out into the community.”

He urged visitors to use hand hygiene, wear masks and adhere to physical distancing as tools to mitigate the risk of spreading the virus when visiting.