
April 3, 2020

Dear Resident/Substitute Decision Maker

I am writing to you as Medical Director of The Birches. I hope all of you are keeping well during this stressful time. The world and local news are full of information around COVID-19 but I want to take a moment to reach out to you to discuss more specifically how we are preparing at The Birches and how this could affect your loved one. This is a difficult letter for me to write, and I know, a difficult letter for you to read.

In following public health and ministry guidelines, as you already know, we have had to stop having family and visitors into our residence. As you are not there in person right now, please know that behind the scenes, our staff has been working tirelessly to have all contingencies and policies in place to avoid or mitigate an outbreak. One of these changes in process is that all the Doctors and Nurse Practitioners are working remotely as much as possible, to limit potential outside exposures to your loved one. Despite all of our precautions, an outbreak may still happen. Because of that very real possibility, I want to share with you what we know now about how COVID-19 can affect people based on age and those with pre-existing health conditions.

COVID-19 is a viral illness that spreads like the flu and is hard to contain, despite everyone's best efforts. We know it is particularly serious in older and frail people, especially for those who have other medical conditions. Many of the conditions that contribute to the need for long-term care, also affect how the body copes with a COVID-19 infection. People who are older and who have other health problems have a much higher chance of dying from it compared to a younger or healthier person. This is true whether or not they live in long-term care and is reflected in care guidelines that will apply to all Nova Scotians.

The safest and most comfortable place for your loved one to be cared for is at The Birches. Doctors in other parts of Canada and the world have learned that there is very little benefit when older, frail people with COVID-19 go to the hospital. In particular, attempts at CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) are very unlikely to be successful for older, frail COVID-19 patients, and they are very unlikely to survive even with intensive care. We are also considering the probability of harms for patients, as hospital interventions are very likely to be physically and emotionally traumatic. Finally, in looking at all the benefits and harms, we are also considering the risks of infection for the community of residents, staff, and care providers at The Birches and the community more broadly.

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We have also put in extra safe-guards to avoid transfers to ER for non-COVID-19 related illnesses as much as possible, to try and lessen the potential for infection with COVID-19.

We are preparing to care for any of our residents who become sick with COVID-19 in our care home on special units more equipped to manage this illness, and will be following the principles of care provided by the Nova Scotia Health Authority. These guidelines will direct us when it will be appropriate to have a resident be identified for more acute care assessments or treatments. We want you to know that our main priority is to ensure that your loved one is comfortable and cared for throughout their illness if they were to become sick. Most symptoms are related to cough, fever and shortness of breath which could be treated until the patient recovers, but some cases develop a rapid and severe pneumonia that can only be managed palliatively through Nova Scotia Health Authority Guidelines. Although there is no treatment for COVID-19, there are medicines and treatments for the symptoms that will be provided in the home and they will be provided with all fluids and nourishment for their comfort. Our nurses are very skilled in providing comfort measures, and a COVID-19 illness would be no different in that regard.

We remain dedicated to our residents, your loved one. My heart goes out to you during this distressing time. If you have questions or concerns, please feel free to call my office at 902-889-2650 and we can set up a time to talk. Thanks for taking the time to read this.

Sincerely,

Dr Karl Tennessen