
OVERVIEW OF THE DESIGNATED OFFICERS' PROGRAM

A. Introduction

Emergency service workers – paramedics, firefighters and police officers – may be exposed to infectious or communicable diseases in the course of their duties, including:

- Diseases that spread through blood and body fluids, such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV/AIDS
- Diseases that spread through respiratory droplets, such as influenza, group A streptococcus, viral hemorrhagic fevers and meningococcal diseases
- Diseases that spread through the airborne route such as tuberculosis
- Diseases that spread through other types of contact such as skin contact, bites, or fecal-oral transmission. These may include: tetanus, rabies, *Clostridium difficile*, antibiotic resistant organisms (including vancomycin resistant enterococci, methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, and extended spectrum beta lactamase-producing bacteria).

The risk of contracting these infections can be reduced through the use of health and safety programs designed to protect workers from exposure and the use of personal protection equipment (PPE). These programs should be in place in all hazardous workplaces.

Some emergency service workers, such as paramedics, are trained to recognize and deal with exposures to communicable diseases. Firefighters and police officers may not have received the same level of training to recognize and deal with these exposures, yet they are frequently required to provide the first level of care in environments that are often uncontrolled and in situations where they may risk their own safety to protect others. Within their work environment, emergency service workers may unknowingly be exposed to infectious diseases. Private citizens or off-duty emergency service workers who act as “good Samaritans” in emergency situations may also be exposed to communicable diseases.

B. Purpose

The purpose of the Designated Officers' Program provided by York Region Community and Health Services (YRCHS) is to:

- Educate emergency service workers about the risk of occupational exposure to certain communicable diseases
- Encourage emergency service workers to adopt practices and follow procedures for self-protection

- Establish protocols for dealing with suspected exposure to infectious diseases

Goal

The program's goals are:

- To educate designated emergency service officers about certain communicable diseases and their transmission,
- Provide strategies to reduce the risk of exposure to these diseases in emergency situations and
- How to manage various exposures to minimize the health impacts on emergency services workers.

Objectives

The objectives of this program are as follows:

1. To help designated officers become familiar with:
 - a) **Communicable diseases**, including:
 - The agents (e.g., a virus) that cause them
 - Where the agents are commonly found
 - Objects or surfaces in the environment that can play a role in the spread of disease in an emergency situation
 - How the agents are transmitted and the level of risk associated with an exposure
 - The common signs and symptoms of certain diseases
 - How a person is infected
 - Whether the worker is susceptible or has a natural or acquired resistance to the disease
 - b) **Vaccines and treatment options** that can prevent the spread of specified diseases
 - c) **Precautions and barriers** that workers can use to reduce the risk of being exposed to the specified diseases
2. To provide designated officers with the information and tools needed to assess if an exposure has occurred and to determine the level of risk associated with the exposure.
3. To outline the procedure for designated officers to follow if an exposure has occurred.

4. To reinforce the designated officers' role of informing emergency workers of possible risks related to communicable disease exposures, and advising emergency workers to seek appropriate medical care.

C. Guiding Principles for Routine Practices in Emergency Situations

1. All workplaces should have standard occupational health and safety programs and practices in place.
2. Under Ontario's *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, Section 25, the employer is responsible for assessing the potential risk of occupational exposure to the specified communicable diseases in the workplace and for providing appropriate engineering controls, standards of practice, equipment and education to reduce the risk.
3. Routine occupational health and safety practices should be used in all emergency situations where there is risk of exposure to the specified communicable diseases (bloodborne diseases, diseases spread by respiratory droplets, diseases that spread by the airborne route and diseases spread through person-to-person or person-to-surface contact).
4. Routine practices give the worker the knowledge and skills to assess personal risk in emergency situations and to take precautions to protect himself or herself. The employer is responsible for providing the education and training that will give employees the skills to apply routine practices appropriately in all situations. The employee will then be able to use the learned skills to reduce the risk and prevent exposure.
5. Immunization is a key strategy in preventing transmission of certain communicable diseases. All emergency service workers should be immunized (at a minimum) according to the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) guidelines published in the *Canadian Immunization Guide*, 7th edition, 2006.
6. An emergency service worker who may have a possible occupational exposure to a communicable disease has the right to know and should be informed about the exposure. However, the emergency service worker does not have the right to any information that will breach patient confidentiality, as discussed below, in Section D, Confidentiality.

- Emergency service workers who may have a possible occupational exposure to any of the specified communicable diseases should follow the protocols described in this manual. The protocols respect the provisions for confidentiality in the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*, (HPPA) R.S.O. 1990, c.H.7, Section 39.

D. Confidentiality

In any health care situation, a person has the right to confidentiality. Public health and hospital staff cannot breach the confidentiality of a person brought in by emergency workers by disclosing any information about the patient's health or diagnosis.

E. Notification of a Possible Exposure

To ensure that emergency service workers are notified of a possible exposure to a reportable disease (see [Reportable Diseases List](#)) without breaching the patient's right to confidentiality, York Region Community and Health Services:

- Follows mandatory public health guidelines and protocols developed by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care for notifying any emergency worker who may have been exposed to a communicable disease
- Encourages each emergency service to establish a designated officer who should be trained to assess occupational exposures to infectious agents and who will work with York Region Community and Health Services to notify workers
- Has developed this manual for designated officers to use to fulfil their duties

When it is known that an emergency service worker has been exposed to a communicable disease, the worker should be notified immediately so they can receive care and post-exposure treatment if it is available. Prompt notification allows the worker to take steps to prevent spreading the disease to others if they are infected.

However, in an emergency situation, neither the employer nor the employee will necessarily know if the employee has been exposed to an infectious disease. Therefore, in each exposure situation where appropriate infection control measures were not used or a breach in infection control was noted, it should be treated as a potential exposure. Steps to take after exposure or potential exposure are included in this manual.

F. Roles and Responsibilities

1. The Emergency Service (Police, Firefighters and Ambulance)

Each emergency service sector will be responsible for:

- Assessing the risk of work procedures for occupational exposure, including:
 - ensuring routine workplace practices meet established occupational health and safety standards
 - providing protective equipment for employees
 - training employees
- Appointing a designated officer(s)
- Documenting the exposure, including completing any applicable Workplace and Safety Insurance Board forms

2. The Emergency Service Worker

The role of each emergency service worker is to:

- Be aware of potential exposures
- Know about routine measures to reduce the risk of exposure
- Apply measures to prevent exposures
- Report any exposure that occurs to a designated officer, and complete any necessary Workplace and Safety Insurance Board forms

3. The Designated Officer/Alternate

The role of a designated officer is to:

- Receive reports from emergency service workers who believe they may have been exposed to an infectious disease
- Assess the situation to determine if an exposure occurred
- Notify York Region's Medical Officer of Health or delegate of any reportable disease-related exposures
- Inform any worker who has been in contact with an infectious disease of the possible risk and the next steps to take in the process

4. The Medical Officer of Health/Delegate

The Medical Officer of Health (MOH) or delegate will:

- Ensure emergency service agencies have provided an updated list of designated officers and alternates
- Provide consultative advice on the level of risk when an exposure has occurred
- Inform the designated officer of specific actions the emergency service worker should take
- Investigate possible contacts for cases of reportable diseases, according to routine public health protocol

The Medical Officer of Health or delegate **does not:**

- Assess or determine whether an exposure may have occurred in a situation (role of the designated officer)
- Gather information from the emergency service worker (role of the designated officer)
- Disclose personal health information about the client, including diagnosis (confidentiality)

Note: Throughout this manual, any reference to contact the Public Health Unit will be with a delegate and not directly with the Medical Officer of Health.

G. Knowledge and Skills of the Designated Officer¹

Knowledge

The most important part of the designated officer's job is to understand how the specified diseases are spread. The designated officer must be familiar with:

- **Diseases**, including:
 - the agents (e.g. virus) that cause them
 - where the agents are commonly found
 - objects or surfaces in the environment that can play a role in the spread of disease
 - how the infectious agents are transmitted
 - how long it takes to develop signs or symptoms of the disease (incubation period)
 - when people are most likely to be infectious
 - whether the worker is susceptible (e.g., Does the worker have any chronic conditions that increase the likelihood of getting the disease? Has the worker been immunized or previously infected with the disease?)
- **Vaccines and treatment options** that can prevent the spread of specified communicable diseases
- **Precautions and barriers** that workers can use to reduce the risk of being exposed to the specified communicable diseases

Skills

In addition to knowledge about specified diseases, transmission and prevention measures, the designated officer needs skills to be able to use that knowledge effectively, including:

- **Assessment skills.** The designated officer must be able to:
 - Review reports and ensure that they have all the facts needed for a complete assessment
 - Speak to and interview the emergency service worker to ensure that critical information in the written report is correct
- **Analytical Skills.** The designated officer must be able to:
 - Evaluate both the written reports and their conversations with a worker to assess if the worker has been exposed to one of the specified communicable diseases
 - Act quickly and properly (based on the information provided)
 - Use other resource materials
 - Ask for other advice (when needed)

¹ Adapted from: The Ontario Ministry of Health. Preventing and Assessing Occupational Exposures to Selected Communicable Diseases. November 1994

- **Interpersonal skills.** The designated officer must be able to :
 - Talk easily with co-workers
 - Explain the results of their assessment in a reassuring way
 - Explain the purpose of the assessment and the next steps in the process
 - Relieve any unnecessary anxiety that workers may be feeling
 - Offer emotional support to a co-worker who may have been exposed to one of the specified communicable diseases

- **Accountability.** The designated officer will be accountable for ensuring the protocol is followed and, in this role, they must be willing to:
 - Take responsibility for contacting the Medical Officer of Health or Designate
 - Take responsibility for telling workers and Managers of their findings