

MUNFA's Take On *the Rationale for Changing Mask Policy on Campus*

On October 4 Memorial University once again changed its policy on masks and its COVID-19 response. Two issues are concerning about how this decision unfolded. The first is acute and relates to the safety of the workplace and learning environment; the second is a broader concern of university governance.

For context, the change in mask policy was first announced at an employee Townhall meeting held online at 11 AM local time. The meeting opened with an announcement by the President that the requirement for masks in the classroom would be dropped. This was the first time that employees would learn of this change in policy, occurring in the middle of the semester which had begun with a requirement for masks in the classroom.

Later that day, employees in different units received communication from their respective Deans regarding the change in mask policy. It became clear from the timing of those subsequent messages as well as the timing of a message received from Faculty Relations to the President of MUNFA that there was a lack of coordination of communication around the dropping of the mask requirement. Indeed, HSS faculty received a message October 5 at 6:59 PM [a day after the policy change was announced to employees] requesting help, "...creating a document for instructors to consult if they would like support in talking with students about masking" and that such help would need to be submitted the next day, October 6th by noon.

The way that the series of events unfolded suggests to the employees of the university that senior administration is not serious about real consultation or about shared governance. As a reminder, MUNFA Executive has requested that MUNFA have representation on the Administration's COVID-19 response working group since the pandemic began more than two years ago. Nevertheless, the administration has repeatedly and consistently rebuffed this request.

On the acute matter of a safe working and learning environment, MUNL has now set itself apart from its peer institutions elsewhere in the region. Most higher learning institutions in the region continue to require masks at least in the classroom if not more broadly on their university campuses (e.g., [Dalhousie](#); [Mount Allison](#); [St. Francis Xavier](#); [UNB](#)).

On October 7 the University's Office the Chief Risk Officer ([OCRO](#)) published a [rationale for the change in masking policy at MUNL](#). The rationales for changing the mask policy made in that article are all questionable. For example, the OCRO's published rationale is keen to point to "[expert advice](#)" in support of the change in masking requirements, yet points to no specific experts or their advice. Meanwhile, the British Medical Journal (BMJ) [points out that](#) face masks are a cheap and effective measure to mitigate the spread of COVID and the disproportionate impact such spread has on people with compromised immune systems. Masks remain a cheap and effective part of a layered response to mitigating the spread of COVID. Calls to re-instate mask requirements are already [loud and clear](#) from medical professionals elsewhere in the Atlantic Region.

The OCRO claims that "natural immunity" will protect the MUNL community. On the contrary, research shows "natural immunity" to COVID [does not exist](#). Infection with SARS-CoV2 can lead to severe

weakening of the human immune system and often leads, in addition, to a range of potentially debilitating long-term symptoms commonly known as “[long COVID](#).”

The OCRO also makes false equivalencies between the federal government’s lifting of masking requirements during air travel. It is unclear why the OCRO’s Office mentions the changed mask requirements on airplanes and at airports. MUNL is not subject to regulations issued by Transport Canada. Even if this argument were valid: the cabin air in commercial airplanes runs through HEPA filters that remove 99.9% of pathogens. [Cabin air](#) is exchanged in its entirety [once every three to four minutes](#). Even so, the American Society of Heating, Refrigeration and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) has concluded that this is not sufficient and that passengers [should still wear masks on the plane](#) in order to be better protected. If the OCRO is implying that the indoor air at Memorial is purified with the same efficacy and exchanged at the same rate as the air inside a commercial airplane, the [ventilation audit data](#) provided to the university after MUNFA’s request shows otherwise.

Meanwhile, the OCRO is absolutely right in asserting that it made no sense to require masks only in classrooms and labs. The proper response, then, would have been to require masks in *all* public indoor spaces instead of dropping the requirement altogether. Likewise, the reference to challenges with enforcement is a weak excuse for abrogation of the OCRO’s role in ensuring a safe and healthy working environment. That kind of argument would not hold up in any other situation, e.g., in traffic. Stopping at a red light is still legally required, even though law enforcement cannot possibly monitor every single traffic light in the country. The same is true for the requirement to wear helmets for motorcyclists and ATV operators, or even for students wearing PPE in chemistry labs. Indeed, when performing our work as researchers, even if “low risk”, that situation “[requires](#) that the researchers and the research participants maintain, at all times, a minimum of two-metres physical distancing and wear three-ply masks.” Yet, when performing all of our other work duties related to teaching and service, no such requirement now exists thanks to the unilateral decision of the university’s Administration.

The OCRO’s fears about legal challenges to a mask requirement suggest an institution more concerned about bad publicity than student and employee well being. Public Health regulations in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador [state explicitly](#) that “some employers may require masks for their staff and visitors,” so Memorial University would be well within their rights to uphold the mask requirement. Legal challenges to mask mandates have been [conclusively defeated](#) in this province. In that light, it is baffling that Memorial University should be worried about legal challenges to a mask requirement but is evidently not worried about legal challenges following COVID-19 infections in the workplace, which have been called “take-home COVID” and [can impact employers’ liability](#).

COVID-19 is a serious disease. The decision to protect the campus community from a virus that can cause neurodegenerative disorders and lifelong disability in infected patients has nothing to do with either “comfort” or “popularity,” as the OCRO appears to imply. It is a matter of legal obligation of Memorial University to protect its community from acute infection and from long-term sequelae, in the case of faculty, fixed in Article 27 of the Collective Agreement. MUNL and its OCRO should look to the findings of the [Ontario SARS Commission Interim Report from 2004](#), compiled in response to the first SARS wave. This report found that:

- “Where there is reasonable evidence of an impending threat to public health, it is inappropriate to require proof of causation beyond a reasonable doubt before taking steps to avert the threat. [...] The Commission therefore recommends:
- The precautionary principle, which states that action to reduce risk need not await scientific certainty, be expressly adopted as a guiding principle throughout Ontario’s health, public health and worker safety systems by way of policy statement, by explicit reference in all relevant operational standards and directions, and by way of inclusion, through preamble, statement of principle, or otherwise, in the Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Health Protection and Promotion Act, and all relevant health statutes and regulations.
- In any future infectious disease crisis, the precautionary principle guide the development, implementation and monitoring of procedures, guidelines, processes and systems for the early detection and treatment of possible cases.
- In any future infectious disease crisis, the precautionary principle guide the development, implementation and monitoring of worker safety procedures, guidelines, processes and systems.”

We urge MUNL to heed these findings and to engage in genuine shared governance of the university with the people who provide the core teaching, research, and service mandates of this institution.