

Is Canada warming up to “vaccine passports”?

■ Cite as: *CMAJ* 2021 June 14;193:E919-20. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.1095945

Posted on cmajnews.com on May 28, 2021

As COVID-19 vaccinations ramp up across Canada, the idea of easing some pandemic restrictions based on immunity or vaccination status appears to be gaining traction.

A recent Leger poll of 1529 Canadians found that 61% agreed that governments should implement “vaccine passports” or proof of immunization policies allowing people who are vaccinated to attend public events and gatherings. Up to three in five also believed certain businesses such as spas and gyms have a right to require proof of vaccination.

Another poll found that more than three-quarters of Canadians surveyed support requiring proof of vaccination for anyone boarding a commercial flight.

Earlier this year, such policies seemed “pretty unworkable,” according to clinical ethicist Eric Wasylenko. It’s still not clear how long immunity lasts after vaccination or infection. And immunization researcher Shannon MacDonald noted that many jurisdictions are poorly equipped to share vaccination records.

No Canadian jurisdiction has indicated that they will mandate vaccination against COVID-19. And when Ontario’s health minister suggested in December that people who refuse vaccinations may face “some restrictions” on travel and access to communal spaces, most other provinces and territories dismissed the idea.

But the political tide appears to be turning. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who initially panned vaccine passports as potentially “divisive,” recently said that Canada may require travellers to show proof of vaccination before they can enter the country. “We are looking very carefully at it, hoping to align with allied countries,” he told reporters.



Some jurisdictions are considering relaxing pandemic measures for people who are vaccinated against COVID-19.

On May 31, Ontario announced it would make an exception to restrictions on indoor gatherings to allow 550 fully vaccinated health workers to attend a Toronto Maple Leafs playoff game — resparking online debate about the potential for vaccine passports in the province.

Discussions about easing pandemic restrictions based on vaccination status are underway in Saskatchewan and ongoing in Quebec, according to officials in those provinces. Likewise, a spokesperson for the Yukon government told *CMAJ* “consideration is being given to what restrictions could be lifted, based on vaccine status.”

Last month, Manitoba issued a public health order allowing vaccinated personal care home staff to work at more than one site. Meanwhile, the Northwest Territories eased self-isolation requirements for travellers who are fully vaccinated.

Prince Edward Island has indicated it may do the same, although the government did not respond to requests for more information.

British Columbia’s Ministry of Health says it is “supportive” of using proof of immunization for international travel and will “continue to monitor the rate of vaccination throughout the province to better understand when it is safe to ease restrictions.”

However, Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry has raised concerns about requiring proof of vaccination for everyday activities. “This virus has shown us that there are inequities in our society that have been exacerbated by this pandemic, and there is no way that we will recommend inequities be increased by [the] use of things like vaccine passports for services [or] for public access,” she said.

Earlier this year, New Brunswick's chief medical officer said she could foresee "restrictions on certain types of activities" like travel based on vaccination status. The province's department of health told *CMAJ* it is following federal-provincial-territorial discussions about vaccine passports "to ensure we are in step with what other jurisdictions may be doing."

Spokespeople for other provinces and territories emphasized that everyone must follow the same public health measures in the meantime. The strongest opposition to vaccine passports has come from Alberta, where Premier Jason Kenney has said his government won't provide or require them.

The Canadian Council of Parliamentary Ombudsmen is urging governments to take "a cautious approach that places fairness at the heart of any potential vaccination certification system that is applied to public services." That includes accommodating people who are not vaccinated and ensuring that decisions about access to services are transparent, evidence-based, clearly communicated, and subject to appeal.

Diana Duong and Sierra D'Souza Butts,
CMAJ

Content licence: This is an Open Access article distributed in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided that the original publication is properly cited, the use is noncommercial (i.e., research or educational use), and no modifications or adaptations are made. See: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>