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COVID Update - Fall 2022

September 7, 2022

Dear UTFA Colleagues,

We write with a health and safety update, and to share serious concerns with the Administration's continued dismantling of COVID mitigation strategies, especially **the ongoing 'suspension' of mask mandates**.

While we recognize that some members may be comfortable with the lifting of the mandates, UTFA has been hearing from a large and growing number of our members who are deeply concerned about workplaces that the science tells us are unsafe in the absence of proper measures to mitigate the spread of airborne infections. These measures include but are not limited to verified ventilation and filtration improvements, universal masking, and reduced overcrowding. We are still amidst the seventh wave of a deadly pandemic, with levels of test positivity, wastewater signals, hospitalizations, and deaths higher than this date in 2021 and 2020. We are experiencing massive hospital strain with staff shortages, emergency department closures, and unprecedented overcrowding. Furthermore, a growing body of evidence about long COVID speaks to high prevalence and devastating effects, even after mild disease. Multiple infections increase the risk of long-term damage to many organ systems, which may result in serious cognitive and physical decline.

In contrast to U of T's approach, Western University, Brock University, the University of Manitoba, OCADU, and several other post-secondary institutions have announced mask mandates for at least the Fall term. Western's announcement on August 22, **Western requires COVID-19 booster and masking in instructional spaces this fall**, includes the following compelling rationale (among others):

"Mitigating the risk of transmission of COVID-19 as well as of severe outcomes from the infection can be effectively achieved with a combination of masking and vaccination," said [Dr. Saverio] Stranges, [public health physician and chair of the department of epidemiology and biostatistics]. "This also reduces severity of symptoms and protects those immunocompromised individuals in our community. There is no doubt that this approach will help keep people out of hospitals and preserve on-campus teaching and

learning."

Relying on the expert advice of UTFA's advisory panel of leading indoor air quality and public health scientists, UTFA has been urging our Administration throughout the summer to reinstate a mask mandate at U of T at least until the end of the Fall semester. UTFA's position on masking is guided by our commitments to, and advocacy for, key principles: respect for science; the precautionary principle; and best practices in health and safety that exceed legislated minimum standards—as is required by **U of T's own Health and Safety Policy**.

In response to UTFA's advocacy, including our repeated requests for improved COVID case tracking, data sharing, and transparency in decision making, the Administration instead unilaterally reduced the opportunities for us to raise serious health and safety concerns that the Administration is responsible for addressing, by changing the frequency of our Central Health and Safety Committee meetings from twice a month to four times a year. UTFA would like to do more; however, given the shortcomings of **UTFA's Memorandum of Agreement with the University Administration**, our members do not enjoy the same workplace protections or timely dispute resolution procedures afforded to our colleagues who are members of certified faculty associations.

Further, the University encouraged the posting of signs around campus that label mask-wearing an optional, personal choice. This message was echoed in a July 28 **Provostial memo** touting the University's 'mask-friendly environment' and indicating that face masks are optional. This is a powerful example of how the University Administration has derogated its infection prevention obligations and rebranded COVID health and safety (solely) an individual responsibility, if not an individual choice.

The Administration's decision to reclassify mask-wearing as a personal choice fails on multiple levels. It fails to recognize that because we share the air, the significant COVID risks in our academic workplaces can only be reduced through coordinated and collective action such as universal masking. It fails to protect immuno-compromised and vulnerable members of our community. It fails to meet the standard of "adopting the best practices available to protect the University community." And, it fails to ensure that the University fulfils its duty of care to staff, faculty, librarians, and students.

Even in the absence of a (much-needed) University-wide mask mandate, UTFA wants the University to do much more to counter misinformation and educate about the importance of wearing well-fitting, N95 masks in indoor spaces. Individual units/faculties, departments, and individual members should have the right to make policies that *require* masks in their own classrooms, labs, and other shared workplaces. Regrettably, the Administration has advised us that they will grant our members only the right to *request* that their students wear masks in instructional spaces.

UTFA will continue to closely follow the advice of our leading scientists and to invite collegial, evidence-informed health and safety discussions with the Administration. We will continue to demonstrate how universal masking would enable safer in-person work, support immuno-compromised and other vulnerable individuals and groups, and result in fewer interruptions to teaching, learning, research, and the fulfilment of our broader academic mission. In concert with other GTA campus groups, we are also planning an event in the coming weeks to update members on the latest science and provide expert advice on how they might best seek to manage their risks commuting to and while on campus.

Stay tuned.

Sincerely,

Terezia Zorić
UTFA President
On behalf of the UTFA Central Health and Safety Committee

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