

Reading this disaster story, caused me to hope Saskatchewan does it better! Including with the flue shot! You have probably heard similar stories on the news – but I thought we can't ignore this dynamic. But when you need to get a test, explore what options you have, and be prepared. I hope that as the health systems improve, as well as supplies and workers, that there is not a repeat of similar stories. The author sure was persistent!

My day-long disastrous ordeal of trying to get a COVID test in Ontario

Shannon Proudfoot: Line-ups start at the crack of dawn. Wait times stretch for days. As schools reopen and demand soars, prepare for a new kind of lockdown purgatory.

By Shannon Proudfoot September 16, 2020 MacLean's Magazine

Getting tested at a COVID care centre in Kanata, Ont., on Sept. 16 involved a six-hour wait (Shannon Proudfoot)

A couple of months ago, I was at a friend's place for distanced beers on her patio when we started talking about the "What would you tell your January self now that you didn't know then?" memes making the rounds. She said she would have told her past self not to kvetch about the Ottawa winter, because at least she could do what she wanted with her kids and her weekends, and boy, wait until you see what's coming.

Then she said something that's haunted me ever since: "But I wonder what my now-self would tell myself later this fall? Would I look back and think I had things pretty good over the summer and I didn't even know it?"

I experienced one slice of that bitter truth on Wednesday, in the form of the you-can't-get-there-from-here nightmare that is the current state of COVID-19 testing in Ontario. Or perhaps it's specifically an Ottawa problem, because after spending five hours in pursuit of a coronavirus test and torpedoing my husband's workday by leaving him with three kids, I do not have the bandwidth right now to do comparison shopping.

On Tuesday, I came down with a stuffy nose and the sort of barking cough that have signalled every common cold I've ever had. The rules for kids attending daycare and school, as laid out in Ottawa Public Health's daily screening tool, mean that my kids could not go to school or daycare until I got a negative test result, despite having no symptoms themselves. I went to bed at 8:45 p.m. on Tuesday night in pathetic hope that a good night's sleep would magically make my symptoms and the bureaucratic and pragmatic nightmare that accompanied them disappear.

On Wednesday morning, I felt the same, so my husband and I ran through the sorts of quick, desperate calculations families have been making regularly over the last six months

The line-ups at Ottawa's three walk-up testing centres have become so untenable that a friend who had been covering the story told me that if you weren't in line at the main assessment centre at Brewer Arena by 7:30 am—90 minutes before it even opened—you would not get in that day. Ottawa has a new drive-through testing centre, but the website had no appointments before Friday, which would have guaranteed the rest of my daughter's hugely anticipated first week of school was a write-off. A friend texted the phone number for a testing centre in Almonte, a small town just outside of Ottawa, that accepted appointments, but the voicemail was full and would not be emptied in order to accept more requests until after 9 a.m., by which point the lines at the centres in Ottawa would be so long that they would be potentially cut off.

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So my husband and I decided I would go to a COVID care centre in suburban Kanata immediately to line up for a test while he handled the kids and got approximately zero work done. My symptoms were mild and absolutely classic for the common cold, so I had no reason to go to a centre where they could offer health care and diagnostics, but the lines had gotten so out of hand at the main assessment centre that I thought I should avoid it at all costs.

I arrived around 8 a.m. and had to park 500 metres away because the parking lot and every conceivable overflow space were already packed. I was appalled to see several hundred people already in line an hour before the testing centre opened. The line snaked from the doors of the building and through some tents, then across the parking lot and down the sidewalk as far as I could see. I kept walking to where it looked like the line began, but when I rounded the corner, I realized I'd been criminally naive; the line I'd seen closest to the building was maybe one-third of the total number of people.

I walked down a residential street and past hundreds of already-defeated looking people standing on the sidewalk or sitting in folding chairs they'd brought with them. There were lots of kids in line, several with the same barking cough I had.

At one point, a woman in a minivan with two little girls in the back seat drove slowly along the line offering people bottles of water. A 20-something guy passed me talking on his phone while he stared, shell-shocked, at the line: "Uh, I'm gonna be here for at *least* an hour and a half." I was torn between snickering at his stupidity and hoping irrationally that maybe this magical little man was right and it would only be that long.

After an hour of waiting, around the time the testing centre actually opened its doors, all hope exploded when a security guard in PPE strolled down my section of the line telling us it would be at least a six-hour wait from that point. The 70-something woman behind me started conferring with the family member who brought her about whether she could wait that long, and the security guard told them to come talk to someone at the front of the line if it got to be too much and they'd see what they could do. When he walked by me, I did that pointless thing where you complain or commiserate to someone who has not caused the problem that's vexing you and cannot fix it. "How is this sustainable in a city this size?" I whined at him. "It's not," he replied archly, with a shrug.

A friend who had seen my tweets texted to say that two weeks earlier, she'd gone to the testing centre in Winchester, a small town 45 minutes south of Ottawa, and it had been quick and painless. She waited in her car, called when she arrived and was in and out within 20 minutes of them opening. I considered this for a bit, and that was when I made one of those irrational decisions you make when confronted with a range of bad options, and then you make your own situation worse. I bailed on the line in Kanata and walked back to my car, calculating that I'd arrive in Winchester half an hour before they opened, so even if they were busier now than two weeks ago—a certainty with schools back on—I would still be done and back home faster than staying in the interminable line in Ottawa.

I drove to Winchester, but just like in Kanata, the moment I got near the testing centre, it became obvious I'd made a terrible miscalculation. There were cars on the side of the road all over the place and a ragged sort-of lineup across the parking lot behind the building. As it got closer to the time for that testing centre to open, someone spoke to a staff member and word went up and down the line that they would not be giving out numbers based on where people were in line, as they apparently had done the day before. People just had to just keep calling the phone number to try to get through and put their names in the queue. I tried 10, 20, 30 times with no luck, by which point an acquaintance tweeted to me that she was five days and counting waiting for results from that testing centre.

This is the point when I ended up snivelling into my cell phone at my husband, undone by frustration at this entirely predictable problem. I was also basting in self-recrimination over bailing too fast at the suburban centre, where I would have been more than halfway through the line by this point and merely running out the clock on waiting for my test results.

In the meantime, my other options had evaporated too: the drive-in testing centre had no more appointments for the week, let alone what had once seemed like the too-distant date of Friday. The voicemail in Almonte was still full. And, drawing close to noon, I knew the lines at the three walk-up centres in Ottawa would be so hideous that there would be no point in trying them. I drove back toward home, utterly defeated and frustrated, and still no closer to the negative test result that would let my kids back into their programming.

When I was back in the city limits and drawing close to my house, I recalled seeing some tweets about the third Ottawa testing centre—there is no public health information available about the wait times at each site, so I was reduced to searching for tweets that mentioned each location—closing the line around 1 p.m. the previous day. I still had more than an hour before that point, so I pulled over to search for the address on my phone, figuring maybe it was worth driving by in case I could get in before they closed, rather than waiting another full day to start on the wait for my results.

When I opened my browser, it was on the page where I'd been searching for appointments at the drive-through testing site, and two immediately popped up for Thursday. They must have been cancellations, and I tried to nab the morning one immediately, but like the world's saddest and most annoying concert tickets, by the time I'd completed the steps and logged into the site, it was gone. I managed to grab the one remaining evening spot, but by this point I was so defeated by the whole experience and distressed to realize that the rest of my daughter's week at school was toast, it didn't feel like a victory.

If I'm lucky, sometime on Friday I will have my (presumably negative) results, but the nurse I spoke to later in the day, when I called Ottawa Public Health to verify that I'd done all the right things and had no wiggle room, said results are taking several days in most cases.

And so my family and I—like thousands more—are in lockdown purgatory until I can get a test and the results are ready, despite my best efforts and the huge hassle that went into attempting to do this in anything like a timely manner. You can't resume normal-ish life until you get a clear test, but increasingly, you cannot get a test at all unless you're content to wait several days for an appointment or spend a full day waiting in line out the elements, with no food or water and maybe a few porta-potties available if you're lucky.

The thing is, absolutely zero of this huge increase in demand once school started was unpredictable or even a question mark. Ottawa has functioned with three testing facilities for a city of a million people all summer as September drew near. The public health screening guidelines that dictate children are to stay home anytime anyone in their household has any of the very common and vague symptoms associated with COVID were established long ago. Adding those two facts together was always going to result in the nightmare I found myself mired in today. And god help you if a day or two after one member of your household comes down with the sniffles and manages to get tested, someone else does, because your child still can't go anywhere until the next person tests negative.

If testing remains this frustrating, time-consuming and outright impossible, one of two things is going to happen, or both of them together. Either everything is going to grind to a halt while families “do the right thing” that authorities keep exhorting us to do, hunkering down in their homes, getting no work done while their kids climb the curtains, waiting who knows how long to get a test or the results.

Or, average, well-intentioned people with busy families and lives that need living are going to start fudging their answers to screening questions, sending kids off to school or daycare or themselves off to their workplaces even when they know symptoms have cropped up in their households, because they can't handle the hassle or outright impossibility of getting tested. After the nightmare I experienced today, I can't say I blame them.

And good luck regaining control of your curve when that happens.