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OPINION

EpiPens should be mandatory in public places — they're no different from other safety devices

In recent years, defibrillators, fire extinguishers and first-aid kits have been required in Ontario's public spaces, but EpiPens are excluded. Why?

By Alexia Baggetta Contributor



Oakville firefighters hold EpiPens in this 2017 file photo. “It is difficult to believe Toronto city council agreed the two-step, ‘blue to the sky, orange to the thigh’ application of EpiPens would require a prohibitive amount of training,” Alexia Baggetta writes.

Graham Paine / Metroland file photo

Nobody wants to have an allergic reaction or other health condition act up in public. But it seems that Ontario’s Ministry of Health is prioritizing who deserves access to public safety devices.

Half of all Canadian households deal with food allergies every day, yet Ontario’s government has done little to help those with severe allergies feel safe in public spaces. This includes bars, transportation services, entertainment venues and workplaces.

Defibrillators, fire extinguishers and first-aid kits have been mandated in public spaces by provincial leaders in recent years. However, EpiPens are excluded from this list of safety devices. Why?

An EpiPen is an auto-injecting device that contains epinephrine, a drug that helps control a serious allergic reaction. They are most effective when used immediately, since they are used to buy time until first responders arrive on the scene. This is no different from other safety devices that are crucial in times of need.

Municipalities also need to do more. In 2017, Toronto city council considered — and decided against — mandating all restaurants carry EpiPens. Some arguments council heard from business lobbyists against the proposal: epinephrine injectors eventually expire, making them difficult to track and maintain; additional training for using the injector would be required; people with allergies shouldn’t transfer their responsibility to carry injectors on to small businesses.

It is difficult to believe Toronto city council agreed the two-step, “blue to the sky, orange to the thigh” application of EpiPens would require a prohibitive amount of training. After all, defibrillators are more complex to administer than EpiPens — and more expensive.

Yes, people with allergies must also take responsibility for their allergies when eating in public settings. But allergies aren’t always known until a reaction happens, in which case having an EpiPen on hand could save a life.

Some restaurants don't even attempt to make people with allergies feel safe, and often deflect the blame. They make the usual "we won't be able to guarantee it" statements, leaving people feeling they are on their own should anything adverse happen to them.

Although mandatory EpiPens would be the best solution to make people with allergies feel less anxious about eating out, there are other ways restaurants can help.

Menus that highlight the top allergens in menu items shouldn't have to be asked for — they should already be on the tables before guests arrive, like wine or dessert menus. Also, servers should automatically ask if there are any allergies to avoid at the table.

People with allergies sometimes feel embarrassed to be singled out when speaking up about their allergies, so having restaurants initiate this first step makes it easier on them.

Talking about allergies and bringing more awareness to what can happen during a severe allergic reaction should be normalized. Everyone is human and we all have accidents, but accidents can have less severe consequences when safety precautions are in place.

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