



# The President's Letter

Dr. Noel W. Grisdale



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Dear Member:

*This is an abridged version of my valedictory that I will deliver tomorrow at the Alberta Medical Association (AMA) annual general meeting. The complete text is available at <http://www.albertadoctors.org/PresLetter/Index>.*

It has been quite a year!

Let me first offer a few "Thank You's":

- To AMA members whose support, active participation and unity are essential for the organization's success
- To delegates of the Representative Forum who are a key part of the AMA's leadership, as well as an important link with the membership
- To the Board of Directors whose leadership is valued by every AMA president
- To my colleagues in Black Diamond who were there for me and my patients when AMA duties took me away

One of the greatest satisfactions I have had this year has been meeting so many incredible colleagues across the province. I have been humbled by the extraordinary skills, commitment, and passion of so many physicians in this great province, and I have felt immense pride to be considered a colleague.

When I became president 12 months ago, it was not my intention to clog up your in-boxes with 28 *President's Letters*, 15 issues of *Focus on Negotiations*, as well as five issues of *Focus on Bylaws*.

Members most often expressed support, but they were also not afraid to voice criticisms or concerns, which I greatly appreciated. I also had personal phone call discussions with many members.

The upside was two-fold: valuable and thoughtful feedback from many, many members; and a very strong feeling by members that they know what the AMA is doing and what is happening in the health care system. Moreover, our members want us to be more aggressive and more vocal in advocating for a health care system that puts Patients First®.

Physicians are not necessarily anti-Government and they are not necessarily anti-Alberta Health Services. But what physicians very strongly are – is pro-patient.

This year I was fortunate to be able to build on Dr. LaBuick's momentum and bring Negotiations 2008 to a conclusion. In doing so, all three parties in the trilateral agreement – Alberta Health Services, Alberta Health and Wellness, and the Alberta Medical Association – agreed that one goal was to make Alberta a destination of choice in Canada for physicians.

Unfortunately, the strength of that agreement may not be enough. I refer, of course, to the uncertainty and lack of transparency surrounding decision-making in health care today, both by the Government and by Alberta Health Services.

The Alberta Medical Association and Alberta physicians have been most understanding of the need to improve accessibility to health care in Alberta. We also understand the Government's financial situation. But we do not understand why we have been excluded from decisions where our expertise, our experience and our efforts could have resulted in better decisions.

Perhaps the most recent example is Bill 52, which amended the *Health Information Act*.

Alberta Health and Wellness brought forward the original amendments without any consultation with us. Until the AMA became involved, it appeared that the very private health information of our patients would only remain private at the whim of the Minister of Health and Wellness and not at the discretion and wishes of our patients themselves.

The AMA did an outstanding job of working with numerous parties and numerous individuals. I commend the AMA staff, led by our Executive Director Mike Gormley, who were instrumental throughout the process and need to be publicly recognized for their efforts!

I must also express our appreciation to Fred Horne, the MLA who chairs the Legislature's Standing Committee on Health, and other members on the committee. They were diligent in understanding concerns raised by the AMA and a number of other organizations.

More legislative changes loom on the horizon with the recent announcement by Health Minister Ron Liepert of his Minister's Advisory Committee on Health.

If Government wonders why physicians are cynical about the committee's true intent, let me explain why. After the media broke the story about the committee, the Government radically revised its terms of reference, at least for public consumption.

For over a year the Alberta Medical Association had been asking both the Government and Alberta Health Services to begin discussions on how Alberta's health care system can be improved. Then, with no consultation and no warning, we have the Minister's Advisory Committee on Health.

Change is needed, but it needs to be done with proper input, with proper consultation, and true feedback from all stakeholders. Trying to achieve this kind of consultation on the changes we need in Alberta in just 75 days is Mission Impossible! Such a timetable also prompts skepticism on whether the advisory committee is merely a foil for decisions that have already been made.

Given the integrity of several committee members whom I know, I believe the 16 committee members will make their own decisions. However, what is not known is the impact that the committee's report and recommendations will ultimately have on any decisions that the Government makes.

All of us are cognizant of the revenue and budget challenges facing the Government. As a result, any decisions on health care by Government and by Alberta Health Services naturally lead many Albertans to believe that dollars are deciding what is best for Alberta's health care system, and not evidence-based decisions on what is best for patients.

This perception that the Government is only motivated by, and focused on, revenue and deficit is made worse by the lack of transparency in decision-making. It is exacerbated by the absence of physicians and other health care providers in the decision-making.

Relationship building has been a big part of this year. Minister Liepert and I had many conversations. While we did not always agree, I felt there was always mutual respect, and I appreciated the time and consideration he showed myself and the AMA. In the end, despite differences, we did recognize we had a common goal of delivering the best health possible to Albertans.

Alberta Health Services is still struggling to define itself. That's why we have been putting our energy into building a relationship with AHS, first with Dr. David Megran who is the Senior Physician Executive with AHS, and also with CEO Dr. Stephen Duckett and with the AHS Board Chair Ken Hughes. Informally I think we are doing well in this area and I believe these relationships will only strengthen.

Formally, the Representative Forum has helped to advance this relationship through the Council of Presidents, more specifically in the development of province-wide medical staff bylaws and the Provincial Physician Liaison Forum.

The forum is just getting off the ground. I am optimistic that it will provide a good opportunity for Alberta Health Services and the Alberta Medical Association to engage in honest and productive discussions - and sometimes even difficult discussions - without prejudice or retribution.

Alberta Health Services has many venues in which to consult with physicians and to engage us. But the onus is not just on AHS, because as physicians we must always fulfill our responsibilities.

In the past five or six years, through the trilateral agreements, the focus has been on family physicians. As a result, their economic position has improved significantly and Alberta has become a leader in primary health care teams through the Primary Care Networks.

Speaking as a family physician, I cannot emphasize too strongly that it is very important that the Alberta Medical Association not forget our specialist colleagues.

In the past several years the AMA has been an active participant in initiatives:

- To improve the health care system that range from electronic medical records to rural support programs
- As well as physician health, physician retention, and supporting continuing medical education

In the Physician Services Budget, tough choices have had to be made as to where limited dollars can go. I do not apologize for having been part of these decisions because focus is required to be successful. An attempt to try and achieve everything in the short run is typically at the cost of achieving nothing.

However, these decisions have caused strains within our profession. The needs are great and we face similar, but somewhat different, challenges: general practitioners and specialists; community and hospital based; town and gown; proceduralist and non-proceduralist; PCN and non-PCN physicians.

We may have our differences, but now more than ever we need to hold together what we have in common – the best for all our patients! If we are strong as a profession, we can weather the storms of change. To all physicians I say, “We need to be honest with ourselves first.”

How can we make things better for our patients and for our profession? What skills do we have? What are our own interests? How can we serve?

Physicians are often looked upon as role models. We are leaders in our communities. We need to be cognizant of the expectations, and the trust, that are foisted upon us.

Where do we go from here? What does the future hold?

I do not have definite answers to these questions, but I do know that the Alberta Medical Association will be there – involved and advocating for patients and for physicians.

I do not subscribe to the theory that Alberta Health Services and Alberta Health and Wellness have any mal-intent with the changes they may envision in months and years to come. However, for change to be successful it is absolutely essential to create an environment where all stakeholders can buy in and embrace that change.

*The President's Letter*  
September 25, 2009  
Page 5

A big part of that environment needs to be real engagement and input – from patients but also health care providers and not just a few random individuals selected by Government.

This is why, now more than ever, physicians need to remember that our strength comes from why we exist – the service of patients!

We need to ensure that the medical profession is putting Patients First<sup>®</sup>, and we are doing it, not only as individual physicians but also together!!

I want to finish by saying that this year, for me personally, has been an incredible journey, and one I have been honored and humbled to travel.

We are in great hands going forward with Drs. Chip Doig and PJ White at the helm. I'd like to leave you and them with a quote from Winston Churchill:

“Every day you may make progress. Every step may be fruitful. Yet there will stretch out before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending, ever-improving path.

“You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb.”

Thank you!

Yours truly,

Noel W. Grisdale, MD, CCFP  
President