



Dr. Tzu-Kuang (T.K.) Lee

The **President's** *Letter*

December 9, 2005

Dear Member:

The following letter was sent December 8 to Minister of Finance Shirley McClellan and all other MLAs.

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The Honorable Shirley McClellan
Deputy Premier
Minister of Finance
224 Legislature Building
10800 97 Ave NW
Edmonton AB T5K 2B6

Dear Madam Minister:

As you and your government colleagues prepare the 2006-07 provincial budget, the Alberta Medical Association (AMA) asks that due attention be given to Alberta's publicly-funded health care system. The report of the Premier's Advisory Council on Health (Mazankowski report) recommended that Alberta's health sector be recognized and promoted as "a dynamic, powerful asset to the provincial economy."

Alberta's health care system is, and must continue to be, a key feature of the Alberta Advantage. Publicly-funded health care is an investment in Alberta's competitiveness. It provides value for employees and employers, individuals and families, and taxpayers. Businesses require an excellent health care system that offers timely access and quality care.

Alberta's system is one of the best in the country but it will require sufficient investment and resources to support the province's projected economic growth.

The Provincial Government has previously recognized that investing in health care means more than adjusting for inflation and population increases; it also requires strategic investments for innovation, leadership and change. For example:

- \$75 million to improve mental health services
- \$1.4 billion for 20 capital projects that will result in more than 650 new and upgraded acute care beds and 85 new long-term care beds across the province
- \$20 million for a pilot project providing hip and knee replacements that will not only improve the lives of 1,200 Albertans, but also improve clinical outcomes and efficiency in the system

The landmark, eight-year trilateral agreement between the Alberta government, AMA and Alberta's Regional Health Authorities is adding to Alberta's reputation for innovation, leadership and entrepreneurship. For example, initiatives such as:

- **Primary care networks** - These networks are a unique, made-in-Alberta approach changing how primary health care is delivered. Each network is a joint initiative between local family physicians and their regional health authority. Networks are up and running in Bonnyville, Camrose, Chinook (Cardston, Lethbridge, Pincher Creek, Taber), Edmonton, Fort McMurray and WestView (Spruce Grove and Stony Plain). Others are expected shortly in Calgary (two networks, including one with eight communities: Black Diamond, Claresholm, Gleichen, High River, Nanton, Okotoks, Strathmore, Vulcan), Red Deer and Rocky Mountain House. Before the end of 2006, primary care networks could involve more than 800 doctors and provide care to over one million Albertans. And, new proposals are being developed.
- **e-health** - Alberta is one of the e-health leaders, if not the leader, in North America. A major factor is the Physician Office System Program that encourages physicians to computerize their offices. As a result, Alberta is poised to earn an excellent return on its investment with the province-wide electronic health record (EHR), which the premier has set as a goal by 2008. (An EHR is the information compiled by regional health authorities. The electronic medical record [EMR] is information that a patient provides to her or his physician, is kept by the physician, and is not part of the EHR.)

Rural sustainability is important to the government and to the AMA. This year the association provided extensive input into the province's review of long-term care and to the Task Force on Rural Issues, chaired by Doug Griffiths (Battle River-Wainwright). As highlighted above, the trilateral agreement has resulted in the primary care networks and computerization of physician offices.

Rural sustainability involves identifying ways to: (i) attract and keep physicians in rural Alberta; and (ii) build strong regional centres (Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge,

Medicine Hat, Red Deer). The AMA Physician Locum Service provides replacement physicians on a short-term basis to small rural communities and for specialists in the regional centres. These locum services have been absolutely pivotal for physicians outside of Calgary and Edmonton. New ways of compensating physicians, such as alternate relationship plans, are being considered.

Alberta's track record in attracting and keeping physicians is one of the best in Canada in the past few years. Still, the province faces a continuing shortage of physicians. In an informal survey earlier this year, regional medical directors estimated Alberta has an immediate requirement of 700 – 800 physicians. Alberta physicians work, on average, 52 hours a week; however, 25% plan to reduce the number of hours they work over the next two years, and 5% plan to retire.

Given the Canada-wide shortage of physicians and the international competition for physicians, Alberta needs to be competitive in terms of compensation and the role of physicians. In a recent Ipsos Reid survey released November 30, "hiring more doctors and nurses" emerged as the top priority for Albertans. Not far behind was "reducing wait lists for diagnostic services like MRI and CAT scans."

Moreover, health care continues to be the dominant priority of Albertans. In the third quarter (September 2005) Ipsos Trend Report Alberta, 54% of Albertans identified health care as their No. 1 priority; education was a distant second at 24%.

The Alberta Medical Association is a long-time advocate for a publicly-funded health care system that provides timely access and quality care, and puts Patients First®. Madam Minister, I am confident that you will do your utmost to have the 2006-07 Alberta budget address the needs and concerns Albertans have regarding their health care system. It should reflect the contributions of the health care sector to the Alberta economy, to the competitiveness of Alberta businesses and to rural sustainability.

Yours truly,

Tzu-Kuang (T.K.) Lee, MB, BS
President

cc: Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta

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