

The President's Letter

Dr. G.N. (Gerry) Kiefer



September 22, 2006

Dear Member:

Last weekend at the Alberta Medical Association (AMA) annual general meeting and fall Representative Forum (RF) in Edmonton, I was honored to become your 2006-07 AMA president. With this honor comes responsibility – and I am mindful of the challenges and opportunities facing our association in the year ahead.

Negotiations 2006

Status and issues

Although negotiations for a new financial agreement began late last fall, we still do not have a new fiscal agreement. The first three-year fiscal agreement within the eight-year trilateral agreement between Alberta Health and Wellness (AHW), AMA and the regional health authorities (RHAs) expired March 31, putting us well into the two-year term (April 1, 2006 - March 31, 2008). Against the backdrop of soaring overhead costs and physician shortages, many of you have told us how concerned you are about the pressures you face on a daily basis.

We need an agreement – as soon as possible – to support you in your practices. While negotiations have all but ground to a halt at the negotiating table, activities continue on other fronts and at other venues. As discussed and agreed at RF, we will continue to build on some current activities (e.g., lobbying) and introduce some new initiatives. For example, RF passed resolutions urging the Board of Directors to establish a Job Action Group and to continue preparing for binding arbitration.

The March 31 vote on Premier Klein's leadership impacted the government's willingness and ability to make decisions. Complicated by the vacuum in leadership created by the Progressive Conservative (PC) leadership race, there appears to be an inertia in government with little appetite for making major financial decisions (such as completing our negotiations) until a new leader is elected.

Negotiations 2006 provides a venue to deal with some of the unique challenges and opportunities we face in Alberta including:

- **Skyrocketing overheads** – With the economy booming, physicians are finding it increasingly difficult to meet expenses as rents and other overhead costs soar. While most businesses can increase prices to meet the bottom line, physicians have no such recourse. Physician fees are not keeping pace with costs, and will not do so until an appropriate increase to the physician services budget is negotiated.

- **Physician shortages** – Alberta’s population is growing rapidly (26,000 people since April), outpacing the growth in the numbers of physicians needed to deliver timely medical care. Physician resources are at a critical juncture with a current shortage of more than 1,000 physicians. This shortage is forecast to reach 1,500 in less than five years.
- **Recruitment and retention** – Economic realities and physician shortages make recruitment difficult in a province that is only sixth in physician expenditures across Canada. As an increasing number of baby boomer physicians retire and workloads become heavier, physician burnout becomes a reality that must be addressed.
- **Physician Office System Program (POSP) funding** – Overhead funding to continue computerizing physician offices is essential so that Albertans get maximum benefit from the electronic health record (EHR). By this fall about 1,000 physicians will no longer receive POSP funding. While physicians recognize the value of electronic medical records (EMRs) to patient care, they are hard put to pay for them on top of dramatic increases in overhead expenses.

RF agreed that, if POSP ceases to fund office computerization costs, the Negotiating Committee should recoup costs as part of the overhead component of fees in the Schedule of Medical Benefits. As well, RF passed resolutions regarding protection of personal privacy and confidentiality of patient information in the EHR and EMR.

Trilateral agreement and process

RF delegates expressed concern about a perceived lack of commitment by AHW and the RHAs to the trilateral agreement, unless an issue is in their self-interest. As a result, RF directed the AMA to urge AHW and the RHAs to commit to the trilateral process to resolve the pressing problem of physician shortages throughout Alberta.

AMA strongly supports finding local solutions within the established trilateral provincial framework to address situations such as those in northern Alberta. AMA appreciates that there are some major local issues that call for immediate solutions. We are exploring options through the trilateral process to support physicians affected by local market realities in northern communities within a framework that can be applied across the province.

Progressive Conservative leadership race

AMA’s Government Affairs Committee Chair, Dr. John T. Huang, discussed the political realities that exist during the leadership race. Dr. Huang urged RF delegates (and by extension, all physicians) to support candidates who endorse a strong health care system in Alberta.

I appreciate the PC leadership race is a partisan process and not all physicians will feel comfortable joining the PC party. But for those of you who would consider doing so, I encourage you to learn about the candidates, talk to them and get involved. Let them know what it means to be on the front lines of health care today and help them to understand the pressures for physicians.

Support the individual that you believe will appropriately address issues important to the profession – and to Albertans – to ensure that physicians can continue to put Patients First®.

RF delegates recognize the need to lead this important activity. To assist, AMA has posted on the member-only portion of the AMA website:

- A list of the nine leadership candidates with:
 - Their phone numbers, email addresses, websites
 - Their views on health care
- Schedule of all-candidates' forums
- 10 questions for the candidates
- Links to:
 - PC Alberta website
 - An informative and entertaining Wikipedia discussion of the leadership race

This information may be updated from time to time. Access this material by linking to <http://www.albertadoctors.org/advocacy/PCLeadership> or log on with your AMA member number and password and look under Advocacy/Negotiations 2006.

New board members

RF elected four members to the Board of Directors:

- Three-year terms
 - Edmonton emergency physician Dr. Daniel J. Barer
 - Medicine Hat family physician Dr. Fredrykka D. Rinaldi
 - Calgary family physician Dr. Linda M. Slocombe
- Two-year term
 - Edmonton psychiatrist Dr. Padraic E. Carr

On a personal note, I'd like to thank Dr. T.K. Lee for his dedication and leadership of the profession as AMA's 2005-06 president. I'd like to assure you that I am ready and willing to pick up where Dr. Lee left off, to face head-on the challenges ahead. I look forward to working with you and encourage you to keep in touch over the next year.

Yours truly,

G.N. (Gerry) Kiefer, MD, FRCSC
President

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