

ALBERTA MEDICAL ASSOCIATION UNDER-SERVICED AREAS POSITION STATEMENT

Preamble

- The Physician Resource Planning Committee (PRPC) report and other sources clearly identify a physician shortage in Alberta.
- At best these physician shortages will continue into the medium term.
- While the province, in general, does not have sufficient numbers of physicians to meet the service needs of Albertans, some locations in the province have greater difficulty attracting and retaining physicians and face a relatively greater under-service situation.
- Alberta's strategy with regard to physician resources should be: retain what we have; recruit where we can; and, support innovation.
- Price (compensation) plays a critical role in determining the relative competitiveness of Alberta vis-à-vis other jurisdictions, including: as an incentive to locate in areas that have had difficulty attracting and/or retaining physicians; as a mechanism for rewarding innovation and productivity; and, as a means of recognizing new physician roles and responsibilities within the health care system.
- As a component of compensation, and to support and promote retention of physicians, the Alberta Medical Association (AMA) endorses the establishment of a program to reward physicians for continuous service to the people of Alberta.
- The trilateral master agreement (TMA) is an integral and significant component of an overall strategy to ensure that Albertans have appropriate and timely access to quality medical care.

Provincial approach to address under-serviced areas

- The AMA believes that a provincial approach is required to address issues in under-serviced areas.
 - Establish and assess provincial core requirements, using the PRPC report as an important source document, including the development of an annual provincial plan and access targets.

- Establish the Physician Services Budget on a needs-based approach, including:
 - Fee increases to ensure Alberta remains competitive and can retain and recruit physicians.
 - Budgeting for the impact of targeted additional new physicians to meet needs.
 - Continued support of innovations and new arrangements including Alternate Relationship Plans (ARPs) and Primary Care Networks (PCNs).
- Establish a provincial framework, with designated funding, within the TMA for dealing with under-serviced areas in the province. Components of the provincial framework are as described below.

Support the existing consensus supplement process

- The TMA recognizes that there may be situations where, “in the overall best interests of Albertans,” payment supplements are required to support the delivery of physician services in particular locations.

The consensus supplement process has, however, faced a number of challenges: lack of funding to finance the supplements; ad hoc nature of the process – no criteria have been developed to support the process; deals with one issue at a time – may create instability; and administratively expensive.

Improvements are required to the consensus supplement process.

- Funding should be available within the Physician Services Budget to support the consensus supplement process.
- The Master Committee should develop clear policies and process for receiving, reviewing and approving consensus supplements.

Establish an Alberta under-serviced area program

- The purpose of the under-serviced area program will be to establish financial incentives for physicians practising in difficult-to-recruit/retain areas of Alberta.
 - An under-serviced area program working group should be established to make recommendations to Master Committee regarding the structure of an under-serviced area program.
 - The working group should include representatives from Alberta Health and Wellness, AMA, regional health authorities, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta, the Rural Physician Action Plan and Alberta’s two medical schools.

- The working group should review current programs in operation in other jurisdictions as well as other relevant information, and prepare a report to Master Committee that includes the development of a proposal for an under-serviced area program for Alberta. The proposal should include program eligibility, rates, renewal, assessment, governance and budget.
- The working group should submit its report to the Master Committee in a timely fashion.

Support a process to identify and act on communities in crisis

- The purpose is to provide specific financial support on a timely basis to physicians practising within communities deemed to be in crisis with regard to access to physician services.

The physician shortage in Alberta is province wide and exacerbated by the financial impact of a hyperactive economy on physician overhead costs. In certain communities, however, where it has always been difficult to attract and retain physicians, this new financial environment is pushing those doctors practising there to a new level of extremity. It is these communities that would be considered to be “in crisis.”

- The Master Committee should develop an efficient process to receive, review and approve funding proposals for communities in crisis.
- When an under-serviced area program is established, all crisis proposals will be reviewed and, where appropriate, will come under the under-serviced area program.