

The President's Letter

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September 11, 2006

Dear Member:

As a result of recent letters about the Physician Office System Program (POSP), I have heard from many physicians about the ways that computerization improves patient care.

I have also heard – loud and clear – the dismay at the loss of POSP funding, a reality facing about 1,000 AMA members this fall after completing 48 months in the program. At the same time, I have been told of the frustration among physicians who would like to introduce electronic medical records into their practices, but are unable to do so without the necessary financial support.

Let's not forget the reason why POSP was created in the first place. It was to support government's plans for an electronic health information network by distributing certain overhead dollars directly to physician office computerization, instead of building those costs into fees. The funding formula – 70% government, 30% physicians – reflected that most of the benefits of this technology accrue to the health care system.

Physicians understand the importance of POSP. Here's what they are saying about the program, patient care and the burden of increasing overhead costs.

"You know what my POSP computerization does?" said one physician. "It lets me deliver the care I want to deliver – and do it really, really, well."

This POSP pioneer went on to talk about the future potential of computerization for improving patient care. He explained how electronic scheduling can enable improved access while helping physicians do a better job of providing services where and when they are needed. Electronic medical records may help physicians monitor their own patients for things like mammography screening, Pap smears or vaccinations and the technology can provide reminders when it's time to follow up with patients on certain issues. The possibilities are huge.

Physicians want these kinds of improvements to patient care – and that's why they fear the choice they may face in the future as their overhead costs – already substantial in Alberta's super-heated economy – climb significantly with the ongoing costs of maintaining and upgrading the computerization.

As one physician wrote:

“Now that POSP funding has ended, we are finding that our costs in fact are much higher. Maintaining a proper electronic medical record takes *more* staff time. Our monthly maintenance costs alone are \$500 for two doctors. That does NOT include the replacement of equipment that is already outdated. Furthermore, our provider is requiring us to replace and refurbish a lot of the hardware and software We are seriously considering giving up the electronic medical record to save money. ”

The impact of inflationary overhead costs cannot be overestimated. Here is another striking story:

“I have been in practise for 30 years and would like to be able to continue in this location. However, two of my colleagues are retiring this year and my two other partners and I will not be able to afford the extra overhead. We have not been able to attract a new doctor to the practice as of yet and are not hopeful that we will be able to do so. This practice has been operating in this location for 40 years and we have numerous patients who have been coming to this clinic for all of these years. I think that it is highly likely that we are going to have to close completely and look for sessional jobs in order to afford to work. What a sad state of affairs for both ourselves, our excellent staff, but mostly for our patients, many of whom are elderly. Needless to say, this practice is experiencing serious angst at this time. What a slap in the face to not even have had our POSP funding continued.”

POSP has been a significant part of Alberta’s leadership in e-health and an advantage in attracting and retaining physicians. In a time when overhead costs are eroding the ability of physicians to practise medicine, continued funding of physician-office computerization will help solve Alberta’s growing physician resource shortage.

And, if physicians aren’t using computers in their practices to manage patient information, what good will the provincial electronic health record do? Without ongoing financial and related support for POSP, government will be wasting hundreds of millions in electronic health record investment.

Yours truly,

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