



# The President's Letter

Dr. Noel W. Grisdale



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July 20, 2009

Dear Member:

Advocacy for patients – as individual physicians and as a profession – is a responsibility that is imbedded within our medical DNA.

The Alberta Medical Association (AMA), as the voice of the medical profession in Alberta, has demonstrated this in both actions and words – most recently in a letter by strongly recommending that Alberta Health Services (AHS) “take immediate steps to review and replace the (AHS) Code of Conduct.”

The AHS board approved the code prior to the current administration. At a June meeting of the Council of Presidents – several weeks before media coverage about the code – Dr. David W. Megran, Senior Physician Executive for AHS, asked us for feedback on it. The United Nurses of Alberta, which represents AHS employees who are registered nurses, has also strongly objected to portions of the code.

Last week Dr. Darryl D. LaBuick, who as AMA past president chairs the council, provided our views in our letter in which he outlined four major objections and “the seriousness of the concerns being raised by many physicians regarding the Code of Conduct and its impact on physicians to advocate for patients.”

In brief:

- The code must recognize health professionals such as physicians who are self-regulated and bound by professional ethics. Adherence to the profession’s own Code of Ethics supercedes adherence to the AHS Code of Conduct.
- The section on “Public Statements” interferes with the duty of physicians to advocate and is not consistent with AHS’ values of transparency and openness.
- A code to govern administrative conduct and accountability should be developed.

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Over the years the AMA has supported physicians who drew the ire of an administrator in the former regional health authorities, government officials or the private sector.

In 2002, for example, the AMA protested the dismissal of the Palliser Health Authority's medical officer of health, Dr. David R. Swann (now the leader of the Alberta Liberal Party and the official opposition in the Legislature) for speaking out. He was subsequently offered reinstatement.

In 2007, the AMA's Representative Forum strongly supported this resolution:

"That the AMA express to the Federal Minister of Health that physicians, as individuals, need to be free to speak out for their patients and for the residents of the region in which they live, and to put Patients First®."

Also in 2007, the AMA was instrumental in the General Council of the Canadian Medical Association strongly endorsing the following resolution:

"The Canadian Medical Association will develop and advocate strongly for the implementation of policy to safeguard physicians from fear of reprisal and retaliation when speaking out as advocates for their patients and communities."

As a professional association, the Alberta Medical Association has been front-and-centre as an advocate for physicians and patients, most recently by lobbying for major and substantial changes to Bill 52, the *Health Information Amendment Act*, 2009.

I'm encouraged by the willingness of AHS now to review the code of conduct and, like all physicians, I look forward to major changes.

Yours truly,

Noel W. Grisdale, MD, CCFP  
President