

The President's Letter

Dr. Noel W. Grisdale



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Dear Member:

For over a year the Alberta Medical Association (AMA) has been trying to engage both Alberta Health Services (AHS) and Alberta Health and Wellness (AHW) in discussions on the direction of Alberta's health care system and the role of physicians in a changing health care system.

The Alberta Government's announcement yesterday of an advisory committee "to focus on improving patient care and health system performance" may be a catalyst for this engagement because a number of the committee's goals and recommendations could require joint decision-making under the terms of the trilateral agreement between AHS, AHW and AMA.

Co-chair of the 16-member committee is MLA Fred Horne (PC Edmonton-Rutherford), who also chairs the Legislature's Standing Committee on Health. He was instrumental in a number of major amendments that greatly improved Bill 52, the *Health Information Amendment Act, 2009*, this past spring.

Three physicians are on the advisory committee: Dr. John Cowell, CEO, Health Quality Council of Alberta; Dr. Tom Feasby, Dean, Faculty of Medicine, University of Calgary; and Dr. John Pasternak, President of the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta.

In addition to Dr. Pasternak, two other regulatory bodies are represented, the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta and the Alberta College of Pharmacists. (For a complete list of the committee's membership, please see the government's September 1 news release at <http://www.albertadoctors.org/PresLetter/Index>.)

Government, of course, can seek advice from whomever it wants. In this case it appointed three Alberta physicians who have excellent reputations, but their organizations do not speak for Alberta doctors.

The Alberta Medical Association is the voice of the medical profession in Alberta on several of the matters touched on, directly or indirectly, by the advisory committee's terms of reference.

Physicians are almost unanimous on this point - 94% identify the Alberta Medical Association as the organization that they want as their representative in dealings with Alberta Health Services and the Alberta Government.

As I mentioned in my *President's Letter* last Friday, the AMA was expecting a task force on health care to be announced. However, the terms of reference changed significantly in the past few days because a direct reference to the AMA and how physicians are paid is no longer included.

The terms of reference touch on a number of these issues of importance to physicians and on which, as I mentioned in the opening paragraph, the AMA had been trying to engage AHS and AHW for over a year. For example:

- "Removing barriers"
- "Promoting wellness"
- "Encouraging evidence-based innovation"
- "Spending that will ultimately improve the health of Albertans"

Nor does the committee have much time. The November 15 deadline is just a couple of months away. That's only 75 days in which to do an amount of work that has taken months or even years in other places.

For example, it appears that the advisory committee is being asked to recommend on the scope of core services that the Alberta Government will pay for: "a new way to define publicly funded health services as guided by the Canada Health Act." (For the complete terms of reference, go to <http://www.albertadoctors.org/PresLetter/Index>.)

It took the state of Oregon several years ... and it involved public forums ... to decide what services the state would pay for and what services individuals would have to pay for.

Moreover, there's conflicting messages in the announcement. The advisory committee is being asked to come up with a "transparent decision-making process." However, in a clear contradiction to transparency, all its "Reports and other materials ... shall be considered confidential."

It is premature to determine if and how the Alberta Medical Association will interact with the advisory committee because we don't yet know how the committee will function or what it might expect from us.

But as I promised Albertans and physicians in my *President's Letter* last week: "... the Alberta Medical Association will be diligent in advocating for a health care system that puts Patients First®." This promise applies to Alberta's health care system on an ongoing basis, and not just to the work of the advisory committee.

Yours truly,

Noel W. Grisdale, MD, CCFP
President