

The President's Letter

Dr. Tzu-Kuang (T.K.) Lee



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Dear Member:

In this, my final *President's Letter*, I wish to review what we, as an organization and a profession, have experienced this past year – changes, opportunities and challenges such as:

- The government's Health Policy Framework, better known as the Third Way, causing tremendous angst about health care in Alberta
- Alberta's hyper-inflated economy impacting the viability of medical practices with physicians facing massive increases in overhead costs
- Physician shortages reducing timely access for Albertans, as well as increasing workloads and the potential for burnout
- Negotiations 2006
- Concerns for quality of patient care from the proposal to allow pharmacists to independently prescribe

The Third Way presented physicians with the opportunity to again advocate vigorously for a well-funded public health care system that puts Patients First® with our patients having options when the public health care system fails. We will continue to strive for a balanced and meaningful debate.

A major event just before my term was the Chaoulli decision by the Supreme Court of Canada, which highlighted the right to timely access and the principle of wait time guarantees – ideas the Alberta Medical Association (AMA) has been pushing for years. Although the court's decision applied only to Quebec, it ignited a national debate on the public-private interface in health care.

Just last week Alberta was presented with its own court challenge. In light of the varying health care positions advanced by the Progressive Conservative leadership candidates, one of whom will be the next premier, it will be interesting to see how the government responds.

On the issue of allowing pharmacists to independently prescribe, I want to re-emphasize the AMA's support for each profession having the right to determine its own scope of practice. With rights, however, come responsibilities and obligations – especially to the patient.

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Physicians understand and appreciate the role of pharmacists in collaborative or team-based care, as is currently happening in hospitals. But proposals outside of the team environment require answers to questions such as:

- How does it impact quality care?
- How does it ensure patient safety?
- What about the potential conflict of interest?

As for the five criteria that the AMA and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta have set out, they reflect the obligations that we, as physicians, must meet when prescribing. The public should not expect a lower standard when a pharmacist prescribes. (And, if government supports a lower standard, then it should explain why.)

The letters, emails and telephone calls – many from members who had never communicated with the AMA before – have been highly supportive.

The stalemate in Negotiations 2006 is the one regret I have for this past year. It was my hope negotiations would have been resolved by now so that the AMA, government and the regional health authorities could be focusing their energies on resolving physician shortages, realizing the potential of the trilateral agreement, etc.

While we try to achieve a new agreement, our patients wait in overcrowded emergency rooms; they wait for referrals and consultations; and they wait for surgeries. Furthermore, thousands of Albertans cannot find a family doctor. No wonder, Alberta is currently short more than 1,000 physicians and this shortage is expected to increase to 1,500 within the next five years. Protracted negotiations are only exacerbating the situation.

Looking ahead, I have an earnest message for our new premier, whoever that may be:

- Value your doctors and other health care professionals. We are in health care because we want to help our patients.
- Recognize that doctors can help provide valuable input into how medical care is delivered to Albertans.
- Involve us, use your physicians' ideas, and don't take us or the Alberta public for granted.

The government needs to invest in the health care system.

Otherwise the Alberta Advantage is at risk. Alberta needs to be competitive – especially in a booming economy. It needs a health care system for workers and their families and all Albertans.

I have personally been inspired by you, our members. We are truly a membership-based organization. I salute all of you! You have shown me that, regardless of the difficulties you face, you always put Patients First®.

Your involvement and support is an indication of the wisdom, strength and perseverance of our organization. You have made the Alberta Medical Association what it is today: one, united and strong.

You have made my job easier, and I know you will do the same for your 2006-07 President, Dr. G.N. (Gerry) Kiefer. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve you. I have never been more proud to be part of this wonderful profession than I am at this time.

Yours truly,

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

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