

The President's Letter

Dr. Christopher J.(Chip) Doig



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Dear Member:

Report of the Minister's Advisory Committee on Health

In these very early days of his tenure, newly appointed Health and Wellness Minister Gene Zwozdesky has a prime opportunity to define a new focus and new direction for Alberta's health care system. Today the Minister's Advisory Committee on Health tabled its report, which can be viewed on the AMA website at <http://www.albertadoctors.org/PresLet/Index> along with the news release.

High on the agenda appear to be a number of recommendations that reflect the Alberta Medical Association's (AMA's) brief and our October 19, 2009, presentation to the 16-member advisory committee, which is co-chaired by Edmonton-Rutherford MLA Fred Horne and patient safety advocate Deborah Prowse.

The mandate of the advisory committee, appointed by then-minister Ron Liepert, is to review Alberta's legislative framework for health care to ensure the appropriate legislation is in place to allow for improved system performance and patient care.

In our presentation, the AMA recommended principles and proposals based on a Patients First® philosophy and approach. Having read today's report, I am happy that most of our recommendations have been included. Among them were:

- An *Alberta Health Act* incorporating and updating the five principles of the *Canada Health Act* – comprehensiveness, accessibility, universality, portability and public administration – plus two new principles: sustainability and accountability.
- A patient's charter that "would communicate to Albertans what they can expect of their health care system" and provide commitments such as wait time guarantees, as well as describing a patient's responsibilities.
- Innovations in service delivery with additional support in primary care to support sustainability and the establishment of "physician-led primary care teams, as proposed by the Minister."

- A “more transparent and evidence-based process for determining core services, i.e., those to be included under public programs.”
- In governance, clarifying the roles of Alberta Health Services (AHS) and Alberta Health and Wellness, with elected public representation on AHS zonal councils and the AHS board itself.
- In changing the scope of practice for any health care profession, the “evidence for such changes should be specified” and any impact should be monitored and reported.
- An independent role for the Health Quality Council of Alberta, analogous to an auditor general, to monitor and report on system quality and performance.

After meeting with the advisory committee, the AMA commissioned public opinion research, then surveyed AMA members with a number of the identical questions and provided a summary of the results to the committee.

There is a high degree of agreement between the public – our patients – and physicians! Among the findings:

- Wait times at 49% and doctor shortages/lack of access to a doctor at 36% are the two major health care issues for Albertans. Physicians agree.
- Both the public (95%) and physicians (84%) strongly support health care guarantees for waiting times, and both also support (79%, 69%) a patient’s charter.
- Both the public (87%) and physicians (86%) agree it’s important to look at the roles of doctors, nurses and pharmacists.

In addition to the co-chairs of the advisory committee, I would like to recognize participants from the public and health professions. Members of the medical profession included Dr. Tom Feasby, Dean, Faculty of Medicine, University of Calgary, and AMA Representative Forum delegate; Dr. John Pasternak, Past-President, Council of the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta; and Dr. John Cowell, CEO, Health Quality Council of Alberta.

In particular, a debt of gratitude is owed to the leadership and hard work of Mr. Horne, who assisted then Health and Wellness Minister Ron Liepert in handling many important issues in health over the past few months.

First meeting with the minister

Soon after being appointed last week, Mr. Zwozdesky telephoned me to touch base; and yesterday he and I had an opportunity to meet.

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As you would expect, the minister is mindful of the public's expectations for their health care system, the government's concern about its fiscal situation and the potential both hold for his stewardship. I respect the difficult role that elected public servants have in government and cabinet.

On behalf of the physicians of the province, and the patients you care for, I look forward to working with the new minister, and I appreciated the opportunity to meet with him and share ideas.

Yours truly,

Christopher J. (Chip) Doig, MD, MSc, FRCPC
President