



The President's Letter

Dr. Darryl D. LaBuick



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May 26, 2008

Dear Member:

The announcement that the Alberta Health Services Board (AHSB) has replaced nine regional health authority (RHA) boards creates a number of opportunities relating to the further development of a coordinated electronic medical record (EMR) strategy.

This letter summarizes the current EMR situation as best we know it and highlights the basic principles we feel are important in moving the provincial strategy forward. It also explains support and assistance the Alberta Medical Association (AMA) can provide.

EMRs: What's happening?

At this time, there are two major EMR avenues for physicians.

- The Physician Office System Program (POSP) provincial EMR selection process is proceeding as planned. A request for proposal to select a reduced number of POSP-eligible EMR vendors will close today. The next phase will involve physicians in the review of responses and hands-on testing of shortlisted products. We expect three EMR vendors will be selected.
- Some regions have recently been pursuing the deployment of their own EMRs. With a single, provincial health services board now in place, the status of these regional EMR initiatives is unknown. However, we will be closely monitoring developments.

At the same time, the AMA will move to represent all physicians in EMR discussions with the AHSB and/or regional initiatives. In fact, primary care network (PCN) physicians, per a recent motion from the Provincial PCN Leads Group, will be formally engaging the AMA in this capacity.

How the AMA can help you

The AMA's goal is to support physicians as you make decisions about the EMR technology that best suits your practice and your ability to put Patients First[®]. Whether you eventually choose a POSP-selected product or an EMR from a regional sponsor, we are here to ensure you receive the best terms, conditions, representation and information.

For example, some things to consider with a region-sponsored EMR include:

- How terms and conditions for these products compare and relate to those of the provincial POSP-selected products
- The extent and duration of any funding and support you may receive
- What the rules will be for sharing patient information with the regions and whether any information management agreement between you and the regions will follow provincial standards or be unique to your practice situation

In addition, at your individual practice/group level, there are many other important considerations in legal, business and technical areas.

Because there are so many questions, it's important that you receive good advice. The AMA has assembled a team of experts (clinical, legal, technical, health information, etc.) who are available to discuss your situation if you are offered a regional EMR.

In the months ahead, therefore, we strongly advise that you do not sign any agreements or offers until you have consulted with us. Contact Victor A. Taylor (Assistant Executive Director, Corporate Affairs) at victor.taylor@albertadoctors.org who can link you to the experts as well a number of AMA resource documents that you may find helpful (some of these are posted on the AMA website at www.albertadoctors.org/ComputerizedOffice/UnderstandingEMRchoices).

In the bigger picture

As we work collaboratively with Alberta Health and Wellness, the AHSB and any regional participants in advancing the provincial EMR strategy, there are six underlying principles the AMA will continue to champion:

1. Technology is not an end to itself. The foundation of Alberta's e-health system should be delivery of accurate, timely and relevant information that is used to care for patients.

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2. EMR technology increases physician business costs for the benefit of the e-health system. If government wants the benefit of EMRs, it must provide ongoing funding for them.
3. Changes such as reducing the number of EMR vendors will streamline the overall system. Physicians who must change EMRs as a result must be fully supported through the transition.
4. Patients provide information to physicians – in the safety of the doctor-patient relationship – that they may not share otherwise. Electronic systems for storing, sharing and using the information must respect that trust.
5. Whether provided by the AHSB or through POSP, all provincially funded EMRs should meet the same standards and requirements, with equal access to both provincial and regional data sources.
6. EMR choice for physicians is an important consideration: Competition fuels innovation, economic value and evolution of unique product features that may better meet the needs of a diverse membership.

Dealing with all these issues is an important part of ensuring that Albertans – as patients and as taxpayers – receive full value from the government's significant investment in the computerization of physician offices and the provincial electronic health record.

The AMA will continue to advocate for your interests and actively provide support. Please involve us in your decisions.

Thank you.

Yours truly,

Darryl D. LaBuick, MD, CCFP
President