

The President's Letter

Dr. Noel W. Grisdale



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May 15, 2009

Dear Member:

Two recent, major developments should give all Albertans pause as to how best to achieve a health care system that is sustainable, has timely access, delivers quality care and puts Patients First®.

- Surgery cancellations announced this week at the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton that are expected to spread to other hospitals across the province.
- Uncertainty about operating budgets that is negatively impacting recruitment of physicians and nurses.

The catalyst for both is the short-term budget challenge facing Alberta Health Services (AHS). The direct and most severe impact, however, will be on our patients! They will suffer as they wait even longer for care.

Moreover, in a perfect example of that classic aphorism “Penny wise and pound foolish,” these cancelled surgeries may well end up costing Alberta’s health care system even more in the long term.

A common sentiment among physicians is that Alberta Health Services was ineffective during its first nine months in pursuing the government’s vision and expectations of operational efficiencies.

The irony: there was unprecedented change but nothing happened!

When the nine regional health authorities (RHAs) and three other boards were amalgamated into a single, province-wide health authority in May 2008, the Provincial Government wrote off all outstanding deficits they had accumulated, thus allowing AHS management to start anew with a clean slate.

A strong argument can be made that Stephen J. Duckett (PhD), the new Alberta Health Services CEO who arrived from Australia in late February, and his management team deserve the same opportunity.

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Page 2

The AMA has had considerable contact with the new AHS administration, including Dr. Duckett and Dr. David Megran, the Senior Physician Executive for AHS. As you may know, last night Dr. Duckett spoke to several hundred Edmonton-area physicians and others in Calgary via video.

Dr. Duckett has been very clear and forthcoming that Alberta's health care system needs to focus on performance targets and measurements if it is to be sustainable in the long term. There is reason to believe that much can be achieved.

Areas for potential savings and efficiencies include:

- Administration
- Procurement
- Economies of scale
- Infrastructure, especially computer systems and e-health
- Delivery of services

In return for addressing the short-term budget problems of AHS, the Provincial Government should expect Dr. Duckett to come forward with a comprehensive plan with realistic targets for achieving long-term sustainable savings.

As physicians, we also have a role to play, and we should be open to examining our decisions and how they impact resource usage and efficiencies within the system.

This is a much better alternative to downloading the AHS budget woes onto Albertans. Our patients are the wrong place to try and achieve savings!

It is my intention to speak with Health and Wellness Minister Ron Liepert about this idea. The trilateral agreement between Alberta Health Services, Alberta Health and Wellness and the Alberta Medical Association offers a structure and opportunities for physicians to be key players.

I would also thank the many physicians who have been advocating for patients within the AHS structure and in the media.

Yours truly,

Noel W. Grisdale, MD, CCFP
President