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# The President's Letter

*Dr. Christopher J.(Chip) Doig*



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February 18, 2010

Dear Member:

## **Throne speech and budget**

Both the Speech from the Throne on February 4 and the 2010 Alberta budget on February 9 offer reasons to be optimistic for those of us who provide health care and for those who require health care services in Alberta.

“Improving health care” calls for a new Alberta Health Act and predictable funding. The tone and intent of the Throne speech reflect the Alberta Medical Association’s (AMA’s) input to the Minister’s Advisory Committee on Health, which included many of the AMA’s recommendations in its final report.

The act will set “principles for the development of legislation, policy and program changes across the system.” MLA Fred Horne (PC Edmonton-Rutherford), co-chair of the advisory committee, has been tasked with public consultations and drafting a report prior to legislation being introduced at the fall sitting of the Alberta Legislature.

Budget 2010 introduces “predictable funding” for the health care system and “stable, five-year funding to Alberta Health Services (AHS).” Last year the AMA called for the government to eliminate AHS’ deficit, and we’re pleased this has now occurred.

Alberta Health Services’ budget will increase 6% for the next three years, then 4.5% for the following two, going from \$9 billion in 2010-11 to \$11.1 billion in 2014-15. Physician compensation and development are budgeted at \$2.74 billion in 2010-11 with a target of \$3.46 billion in 2012-13.

The overall effect from the five-year financial certainty should be leadership with a longer-term mindset and the flexibility to be more creative and innovative. In building Alberta’s health care system, all of us are stronger working in collaboration than in isolation.

### **Strategic partnership**

The trilateral master agreement between the AMA, government and AHS identified the value of a strategic partnership among the three parties in the delivery of health care to Albertans, with the AMA representing the physicians who care for Albertans.

This partnership builds upon the skills and expertise housed within each signatory. Physicians are unique among health care professionals with our specialized education, knowledge, training and skills that are essential for providing care in primary, ambulatory and tertiary settings.

For several years now the Canadian Medical Association has been promoting health care transformation to position Canada's health care system for the 21st century. An overarching Alberta Health Act, a patient's charter and predictable government funding could be core elements of this transformation in our province. Beyond the framework and the principles, a myriad of details await.

Physicians and organized medicine share a common goal with governments: to do what is best for Albertans, our patients, and to build value within the health care system. The Alberta Medical Association expresses this as Patients First® and Value for Patients™.

### **Optometry scope of practice**

The Alberta Medical Association has voiced strong concerns about a proposal from the Alberta College of Optometrists to expand optometry's scope of practice. In preparing its response, the AMA consulted with the sections of Ophthalmology, Plastic Surgery, Diagnostic Imaging, Laboratory Medicine and Pediatrics.

Optometrists want the ability to:

- i. Prescribe all Schedule 1 drugs
- ii. Manage glaucoma patients outside of a collaborative relationship with an ophthalmologist
- iii. Perform what optometry deems "minor" surgery on lesions of and around the eye including some laser surgery (trabeculectomy, iridotomy, YAG capsulotomy), but not refractive laser surgery
- iv. Order X-rays, CT scans, MRIs and ultrasound imaging

The AMA recognizes and appreciates the ability of health professions to determine their own scopes of practice. As outlined in our recent brief to the minister's advisory committee, however, proposals to make changes of such magnitude to the health care system should include:

- Evidence required for the changes
- A process for consultation across disciplines
- Monitoring for, and reporting of, any impact due to the change in a scope of practice

As such, the AMA's commentary primarily focused on optometry's proposal meeting three important criteria: improves quality and access; promotes patient safety; and avoids fragmentation and/or duplication of care or services.

The health and safety of our patients must be first and foremost when government considers changes in scopes of practice and the introduction of new health providers. We will be discussing this further with government officials.

Yours truly,

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