



# The President's Letter

Dr. Christopher J. (Chip) Doig

Patients First® Patients First® is a registered trademark of the Alberta Medical Association.

January 8, 2010

Dear Member:

Professionalism, commitment and unity – which have always served the medical profession and our patients well – will again be required in 2010.

A hallmark of medicine is evidence-based decision-making. On the other hand, Alberta's health care system is subject to a conflux of fiscal, political and personal agendas. Thus the need for physician leadership.

As reviewed in my December 22, 2009 *President's Letter*, the Alberta Medical Association's (AMA's) Board of Directors has endorsed advocacy – anchored by ideas that can be implemented before December 2011 – to advance practical, real-time proposals to improve the delivery of health care to Albertans.

Economic recovery and growth are priorities for all governments, and the health care sector must be part of this economic resurgence. The Conference Board of Canada, in its December 2009 briefing, "The Health Enterprise, Charting a Path for Health Innovation," observes:

"The health-care system does not exist on its own, disconnected from the rest of the economy. On the contrary, as one of the three biggest recipients of public revenues, health care plays an integral role in national economic performance. While most people are generally aware of the cost of health care, the argument for its benefits is rarely made."

Albertans have serious misgivings, especially their wait times for hospital beds and in emergency rooms and the shortage of physicians and their access to us. Moreover, judging by media reports and public opinion surveys, Albertans have lost considerable trust in the Alberta Government.

Public unrest has increased as a result of major concerns with Alberta Health Services' (AHS') \$1.3 billion deficit and the implications for access and quality as plans are developed to deal with that deficit. Missteps such as the decision to save \$70,000 a year by taking away free toiletries and snacks from mentally ill patients – a plan which the government, to its credit, overturned within 24 hours – have added to the tension.

In the AMA's December 2009 quarterly tracking survey, physicians gave Alberta's health care system the lowest ratings ever since the AMA first asked this question seven years ago: "Changes in the health care system during the past 12 months have improved my ability to meet the needs of my patients." Only 11.9% agreed, 20.5% were neutral and 67% disagreed.

As physicians, our energies are mostly invested in doing whatever we can on the front lines. At the AMA, our energies have been invested in attempting to channel solutions through our trilateral process with Alberta Health and Wellness (AHW) and AHS, and with MLAs.

In the forthcoming Cabinet shuffle (now delayed two weeks to January 25-29) there is speculation as to the futures of various MLAs including Health and Wellness Minister Ron Liepert. Regardless of who the minister is, the Alberta Medical Association will do its utmost to have a productive working relationship.

2010 offers numerous opportunities for being creative and innovative, realistic and practical. The makeup of the new cabinet and associated changes in committees, etc., will obviously influence how the AMA proceeds.

So, too, will be the government's approach to its budget, deficit and health care expenditures. The AMA, in *Access to Doctors. Access to Care. March 2006*, noted: "By 'sustainability,' governments mean the amount of money that they are prepared to spend on health care."

### **Patients First® and Value for Patients**

"Value for money" is a concept that is ascending in health care economics. Just as sustainability is too often confined to affordability, value for money can be reduced to simple cost minimization without proper regard for the benefits of care and quality. Decision-making is reduced to a myopic obsession with the \$ without due consideration for patient care. Patients First® compels the Alberta Medical Association to advocate "value for patients."

### **April 1, 2010 allocation**

The upcoming April 1 allocation of 4.5% will be the final one under the eight-year trilateral master agreement (April 1, 2003 - March 31, 2011). Next week the AMA will make available a comprehensive guide to the allocation process.

### **Negotiations 2011**

As mentioned, we'll soon be entering the final year of the AMA's eight-year trilateral master agreement with AHS and AHW. Negotiations 2011 will be a major agenda item at the spring meeting of the Representative Forum, March 12-13.

The contract between AHS and the United Nurses of Alberta expires 12 months sooner than ours on April 1. In March the Stelmach government will be at the mid-term of the conventional four-year mandate it received March 2008.

### **Provincial medical staff bylaws**

The emergence of Alberta Health Services as a single, province-wide health authority necessitated development of a single set of province-wide medical staff bylaws plus rules, a most formidable task. At this point, the goal is to have both the bylaws and rules for review by the spring Representative Forum.

Approval of the bylaws, however, is subject to a province-wide vote of all physicians. A province-wide tour and videoconferences are being considered.

### **Bill 52**

Last year the AMA was front-and-centre in securing a number of major changes to Bill 52, the *Health Information Amendment Act, 2009*. Now, along with other parties such as the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner and the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta, the AMA is monitoring the development of regulations to ensure they meet both the letter and the spirit of the bill.

### **Michelle Lang**

The deaths of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan remind us all of the sacrifices of our military men and women and their families. A few days ago, *Calgary Herald* medical reporter Michelle Lang became the first Canadian journalist to die in the conflict. Below is my letter to the editor which the *Herald* published earlier this week:

“In her stellar career, Michelle Lang interviewed a number of Alberta Medical Association (AMA) presidents. All of us found her to be insightful, knowledgeable, curious, questioning and probing, and we all respected her integrity and work ethic.

“Michelle exemplified the best qualities and characteristics of a professional journalist, and her commitment was to her readers! They benefitted from Michelle’s focus on what was happening with and to their health care system.

“The *Calgary Herald* has lost an outstanding individual who will be missed not only by family, colleagues and readers, but also by those whom she interviewed.”

Many thanks to all of you who email your thoughts, ideas and concerns, who participate in AMA surveys, and who volunteer with AMA sections and committees, the Representative Forum and as MD-MLA contacts in the *Doctor's Black Bag* government affairs program. Your involvement, input and leadership are very important for the AMA's success!

Yours truly,

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