

Doctors warn of looming health crisis in rural Alberta

More rural doctors say government actions are forcing them to give up some areas of practice.

For immediate release

April 20, 2020 (Alberta) – A group of family physicians are raising the alarm about potential widespread service losses in rural communities due to a funding framework imposed by the provincial government on March 31. Now, in addition to dealing with a pandemic, physicians must face difficult decisions around their ability to continue providing extended services in their local hospitals once it passes. Doctors are calling on the government to suspend its new funding framework during COVID-19, and to work with the Alberta Medical Association on an agreement that considers the unique needs of rural communities.

Over the past few weeks, doctors from several sites have already given notice that they can no longer provide emergency room, hospital, or obstetrical coverage in rural hospitals. Dr. Samantha Myhr, a family physician in Pincher Creek, warns, “These announcements are the canary in the coal mine, and this government should treat them seriously. It is difficult to attract and retain rural physicians at the best of times, and I fear that if these changes are not reversed soon the damage to rural communities will be long standing.”

To get a sense of the true impact, the Rural Sustainability Group surveyed rural physicians across the province. Preliminary results are alarming, showing that roughly **47% of the over 300 doctors who responded have already been forced to decrease their hospital-based services by July**. More have indicated that they will likely have to do so at a later date.

“This crisis is going unnoticed because it is happening site by site,” says Dr. Vicci Fourie (Westlock), adding, “Rural MLAs have been strangely silent on this issue and seem forced to tow the party line. I hope our findings encourage them to speak up publicly for their constituents.”

“Rural doctors do not want to be faced with these choices in the midst of a global pandemic,” said Dr. Ed Aasman, President of the Alberta Medical Association Section of Rural Medicine. “Unfortunately, the government changes have created a completely avoidable health crisis that makes the way we currently practice unsustainable. We can no longer do it all and, when the pandemic has passed and we return to regular practice, many rural doctors have to modify their services to keep their clinic lights on and doors open.”

Despite the modifications to health care services expected in rural communities, the Rural Sustainability Group wants patients to know that rural doctors are still here to care for them during the COVID pandemic. These difficult business decisions are being made now so Alberta Health Services has enough time to mitigate disruptions in patient care.

About the Rural Sustainability Group: The Rural Sustainability Group is a grassroots physician movement to draw attention to the impending health care crisis facing Alberta’s rural communities. Their goal is to encourage government to reconsider its imposed changes and work with the Alberta Medical Association to come to an agreement that will not be detrimental to rural health care.

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Media availability:

Dr. Ed Aasman (Rocky Mountain House), President of the Alberta Medical Association Section of Rural Medicine, Dr. Samantha Myhr (Pincher Creek), and Dr. Vicci Fourie (Westlock) will be available for media interviews from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Monday, April 20. In order to comply with current physical distancing recommendations, interviews will be held via Zoom. To book an interview, please contact: savefamilypractice@albertadoctors.org.