

Statement from Alberta's Specialist Physicians:

On Friday, April 24 Alberta's Minister of Health announced the reversal of several previous government decisions that made it unsustainable for many physicians, particularly rural physicians, to continue caring for patients in the same way. These reversals were announced only after some of our rural medicine colleagues had indicated that they would have to change their service offerings in order to keep their businesses viable. Unfortunately, as members of the Rural Sustainability Action group noted, "we may have caught government's attention, but it appears they still aren't listening."

The reversals announced on April 24 focus on several key issues, including the recent changes to overhead codes, the reduction of the Medical Liability Reimbursement Program and the removal of complex modifiers, which had been temporarily paused in early April. No matter what the Minister of Health says now, until this announcement the removal of the complex modifiers had only ever been paused during the COVID-19 crisis – not reversed.

Although we are relieved to see that the government has heard the concerns of rural physicians and their patients, and has backed down on some of the changes included in the Physician Funding Framework, we still have several concerns. One of those is about the government's poorly conceived treatment of family physicians and specialists in regard to overhead billing changes, especially in the rural setting. Many specialists with community-based practices also offer services in Alberta Health Services facilities, and would have faced significant financial losses from the initially announced changes to overhead billing. We are grateful to our rural family medicine colleagues for making the government reconsider its decision, but were disappointed to see that changes to overhead billing have merely been delayed for specialists until October 1, 2020 as the government has asked AHS to undertake a review. Depending on the findings of that review, many specialists may still be forced to choose between practicing in AHS facilities or in their own clinics, as it will be financially impossible to do both.

This government refuses to see that our health system operates through innumerable mechanisms of complex, but closely linked, interactions of physicians and patients that allow physicians to serve their patients. The myriad of different relationships constitutes a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, and is what Albertans count on to obtain care. That system cannot be adjusted without profound consequences for those who don't fit the government's "cookie-cutter" view of how health is delivered. So, as government insists on treating physicians as if they were all either in hospital or out of hospital, it results in gross inequity for many and reveals a complete lack of understanding of how those decisions jeopardize the health of our patients.

We are also deeply concerned about the ongoing lack of respect this government has for physicians and the open animosity it has toward the Alberta Medical Association (AMA). During the media announcement of these reversals, the Minister of Health repeatedly attempted to blame the AMA for sharing "misinformation" about changes to the Medical Liability Reimbursement program. In fact, he actually said the AMA gave physicians incorrect information and "caused needless confusion and anxiety, particularly as physicians are trying to respond to the pandemic."

Not only is that statement incorrect, it is an obvious attempt to paint the AMA as having deliberately misled members about an issue the AMA had actively sought clarity on for months. It also demonstrates that this government does not understand that the AMA is made up of physicians – more than 14,000 doctors, resident physicians and medical students. The AMA is not

misinforming us because *we are the AMA*. Trying to pit physicians against the AMA or each other is unconscionable, and an obvious attempt to quiet an organization that has been the voice of Alberta physicians for 114 years.

Once again, the Government of Alberta has made decisions without involving Alberta's physicians. Despite the AMA's tireless efforts to convince the government to return to the negotiating table, the government has repeatedly refused. Instead they make dangerous decisions, change their minds, blame others and then expect physicians to be grateful. This was a crisis of their own making – they do not get a pat on the back for pouring water on a fire they set.

Alberta's specialist physicians stand united with our family medicine colleagues across Alberta, and welcome these overdue changes that may allow some physicians to maintain their practices. But there are many physicians for whom the damage is already done. They have already laid off staff, closed doors, decided to retire early or begun the process of leaving Alberta. We doubt this announcement will change the minds of those whose practices have already been decimated by this government's decisions. We all know that Bill 21 allows this government to arbitrarily change its mind and reverse any promise or contract it makes. How can any of us trust them to do what they say they will do?

Quite simply, we can't. That damage cannot be undone – no matter how furiously they backpedal.

Sincerely,

Specialty Care Alliance