



October 29, 2019

Dr. Francois Belanger,  
Vice President, Quality and Chief Medical Officer

**Re: Physician On-call Program**

We are writing to you concerning the recently announced changes to the Physician On-Call Program, which are creating confusion and distress among physicians. The AMA and AHS have a mutual interest to ensure that Albertans are receiving the necessary level of on-call services, and that physicians are fairly compensated for providing those services.

Our understanding is that AHS has been paying for these services under a grant agreement, including rates agreed to in 2017 with appropriate adjustments. This has established the appropriate rates for physician on-call for years. Recently, the PCC (without any comment on rates) confirmed the budget of \$93M and AHS is using this (reduced) budget to re-set the rates downward, without any stated rationale for the valuation of the service or any further involvement of physicians regarding the impact.

Physicians have an obligation to provide availability for their patients and the physician on-call program was put in place to recognize the value of these services. This obligation to provide critical availability for physician services further emphasizes the need to have a fair process in place when changes to physician compensation rates are contemplated. In our opinion, if payments are to be controlled via grant agreement with no ability to adjust to patient needs, then the Strategic Agreement should be used to establish a fair rate of pay. We believe this is the correct way to proceed. Transparency and even-handedness are important.

In recent weeks the AMA has received a significant volume of member correspondence expressing a range of concerns including; the method for making the decision to reduce rates; uneven application of criteria for remunerating on call; a dramatic change in call tiers impacting some programs more than others; and a general sense of devaluation of essential on-call service. Running through all these issues is the need for physician engagement and for their concerns to be heard.

There is an opportunity here to establish how the parties will work together in these situations. Indeed, by working together on the rates, we would hope that we would facilitate a better understanding of the value of on-call programs in general.

We have already heard interest expressed from AHS in bringing together a group to work through these issues and to perform a program review and we share this interest. This work seems imperative and please be aware that we are already conducting internal processes to identify who can best represent physicians in this activity.

In response to all these matters, we are seeking:

- A programmatic review to be performed on an urgent basis. The review will include:
  - Establishment or confirmation of a set of principles for on-call remuneration, which may include a set of eligibility criteria that can be applied to existing groups or new groups/gaps within the existing on-call system.
  - AMA representation - the role of the parties and scope of the discussion (including what to do to manage any disagreement) could be guided by the Strategic Agreement or another mechanism as up-front agreed to by the parties.
  - Transparency including a joint communication to physicians and our government funders.
- An immediate reinstatement of the POC rates that were in place prior to September with negotiated rate increases that were effective April 1, 2017, until such time that a programmatic review can take place. We believe there are temporary mechanisms that can be set in place on an urgent basis that will ensure fairness to physicians.

We look forward to meeting with you to discuss these matters on an urgent basis.

Best regards,



Dr. Christine Molnar  
President, Alberta Medical Association



Dr. Luc Berthiaume  
Chair, Specialty Care Alliance



Dr. Graham Campbell  
Deputy Chair, Specialty Care Alliance



Dr. Kathryn Andrusky  
President, Section of Family Medicine



Dr. Ed Aasman  
President, Section of Rural Medicine

cc: Dr. Verna Yiu, President and CEO, Alberta Health Services