

September 29, 2021

Open Letter to Albertans from the Alberta Medical Association's Sections of Family Medicine and Rural Medicine:

Dear Fellow Albertans,

As your family physicians, we believe it is time to have a conversation about how dangerous our current health care environment has become. Alberta's health care system has reached its breaking point and Albertans are at significant risk, not only of being impacted by COVID, but also from the increasing lack of available health care resources. Without immediate action, it is only a matter of time until someone you know, and love will be affected directly or indirectly by COVID.

The decisions made by the Government of Alberta have brought us here. Their refusal to make difficult choices, or to follow the evidence and the science readily available to them, as well as their insistence on prematurely declaring us "Open for Summer," set the stage for this devastating fourth wave of the pandemic. Doctors and health experts across the province warned the government that their decisions would lead us to exactly this outcome. They refused to listen. As an Albertan, you should be angry that it has come to this – we certainly are.

Health system is at the breaking point

Right now, our health care system, our health care workers, and our hospital resources – especially our Intensive Care Units (ICUs) – are buckling. Our Intensive Care and Emergency Room colleagues are exhausted, demoralized and struggling to cope with the unprecedented and unrelenting demand to meet the needs of critically ill Albertans. In an open letter released earlier this week, the AMA's Section of Intensive Care informed Albertans that our ICUs are running at over 150% of normal capacity. Although they have worked closely with Alberta Health Services (AHS) to increase our province's ICU beds, this has required diverting workers from other areas of our health care system. Not only does this result in postponement of surgeries, diagnostic tests, and treatments, it also makes it harder to get the emergency care you or a loved one may need. While Alberta's physicians will always do our best to care for you, we have warned our own families, friends, and our patients to be careful and to refrain from any dangerous activities that increase their risk of accident or injury.

Stopping the spread

Clearly, more Albertans need to get vaccinated – now. Although vaccination rates have increased since the introduction of the province's proof of vaccination program, Alberta continues to have one of the lowest vaccination rates in the country. We have all heard the term "pandemic of the unvaccinated," and sadly this is Alberta's reality. Over the past four months, 153 Albertans under the age of 40 have been admitted to ICU for COVID-19 – 152 of them were unvaccinated.

Additionally, we need to do more to protect children under 12 who are not yet eligible to receive vaccines. Alberta's family physicians are seeing increasing numbers of young children in our practices presenting with COVID-19 symptoms. Often, they have been exposed in schools and daycare settings where masking mandates are not required or not effectively enforced. Until those children can receive their vaccination, they are relying on the rest of us to follow the public health measures that can mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

Time for a fire-breaker

Yesterday, the Alberta Medical Association called on Premier Kenney and Health Minister Copping to institute a "fire-breaker" to control COVID-19 cases and protect our health care system. The Sections of Family and Rural Medicine echo that call and implore Albertans to follow existing public health measures, even if the Government of Alberta does not take quick, clear, and decisive actions. As your family physicians, we know how important it is to follow public health measures – even if they seem to be constantly changing, with exemptions that are difficult to understand. Wear a mask, social distance and wash your hands. Stay home if you are feeling ill and self-isolate if you test positive. Most importantly, remember that the choices we make and the things we do to protect ourselves and each other will have a measurable impact on what happens next in this pandemic.

We hope you will join us in calling upon provincial leaders to institute the much-needed "fire-break," and that you will follow any and all public health measures included with it. We also hope that you will take steps to be fully vaccinated and will encourage all those in your life who are eligible to receive the vaccine to roll up their sleeves. Some Albertans continue to have questions about vaccines, and we are happy to explain that they are safe, effective, and readily available.

As our province navigates its way through this fourth wave, family physicians are here to help you address any health issues or concerns. Although the wait time for appointments may take longer, we are open, and we are ready to see you – both in person and, when possible, virtually.

Now, more than ever, we need Albertans to step up and be here for each other – whether our government takes action or not.

Sincerely,



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President
Section of Family Medicine



Dr. Samantha Myhr
President
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