Sounding the Fire Alarm

My SFM Bulletin last week informed you that family medicine is being threatened with significant cuts under the “consultation” proposals that were brought forward unilaterally by Alberta Health. These cuts, if enacted, will result in a dangerous undercutting of family medicine, i.e., the Alberta government would be burning down the [patient’s medical] house.

AMA Health Economics staff continue to analyze the impact of these cuts and while it is clear that family medicine remains by far the most impacted, it is also becoming clear that other specialties are impacted much more than initially thought.

Awareness is growing across the profession that if Alberta Health is targeting one group of physicians today, they can easily do the same to another group tomorrow if we don’t rally together as one united voice to “sound the fire alarm” and stop these inflammatory tactics.

The Minister of Health, Tyler Shandro, has even publicly admitted (as per the December 3, 2019 Hansard, page 12) that these massive reductions posed in the guise of “consultations” truly belong within the AMA Master Agreement formal negotiations process. In Mr. Shandro’s own words: “...this is a process; it’s a negotiating process.” Exactly. And terming something a “consultation” does not give the Alberta government permission to subvert the negotiating process. Good faith is good faith, and unilaterally bypassing our formal negotiations is NOT good faith.

I thank all of the many family physicians who have written to me directly and who have contributed to the AMA online “consultation” proposal feedback tool. As I work my way through responding to all of you, I fully recognize that it is dedication to patients that is driving the outpouring of indignation, anxiety and fear. It is chilling to read the heartfelt pleas from my fellow family physicians who are projecting upwards of 20-30% reductions to their clinics. There are far too many family physicians worrying they will need to lay off staff or move from rural areas as they can no longer afford to operate their clinics. There are also far too many of our colleagues who are experiencing very real burnout and significant stress due to not being able to offer the time and the comprehensive care our patients and communities deserve.

A call to action

Many members have been asking how they, their clinics and their patients can express their disbelief and fervent opposition to the devastating impacts these “consultation” proposals would have.

As you may expect, the AMA is actively strategizing our profession’s combined response – which will be further discussed and refined at the December 7 Special RF. However, given the significant impact on family medicine, the Section of Family Medicine would like to provide immediate assistance with a few tactics that can be carried out at the clinic level.
Personal and direct contact with MLAs

A personal email or phone call with an MLA tends to garner the most attention. You and your patients are encouraged to reach out to your local MLA to express concern and opposition to Alberta Health’s proposed changes.

You can click to view a full listing of MLAs in Alberta or you can look up your MLA via your postal code on the Elections Alberta website. The more personal the letter about your patients and your community, the more impact it will likely have for your own MLA.

Please be sure to copy amamail@albertadoctors.org and health.minister@gov.ab.ca.

For those members who have requested a letter template to modify/send to their MLA, please stay tuned as we hope to have that out to you early next week!

Ask your patients to sign a letter of support

We have developed a template letter to be distributed to patients as you feel comfortable (at reception, in your clinic rooms or upon discussing with them directly). We also thought it was important for patients to be empowered to share their own experiences and concerns, and have included a space for patients to write a message about how the proposed cuts to family medicine would impact them personally.

Please print copies of the template letter and collect signed letters to send via fax or email to:

- Alberta Medical Association (fax: 780.482.5445 or email: amamail@albertadoctors.org)
- Your local MLA (see MLA listing to find contact information for the MLA in your area, or visit Elections Alberta website to do a postal code search)
- Minister Shandro (fax: 403.592.8171 or email: health.minister@gov.ab.ca)

Letters can be submitted in batches as appropriate/convenient.

In order to be as impactful as possible, please ensure that ALL three recipients (AMA, local MLA and Health Minister) receive your faxed or scanned letters.

My heartfelt thanks to all of the family physicians, as well as to the AMA and the numerous specialist colleagues who are helping us to advocate for and protect primary care. Together, we will “sound the fire alarm” that undercutting high quality, comprehensive patient care is not acceptable.

Physicians have always been willing to partner with Alberta Health in working towards sustainable and fiscally responsible health care, but those discussions belong at our formal negotiations table and should not be under such extreme time constraints.
Please feel free to reach out if you need any more information or support to lend your voice – and that of your patients – to our mutual efforts to “fire-proof” the patient-centered family medicine we all believe in.

You can reach me directly at sfmpres@albertadoctors.org.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Kathryn Andrusky
President, AMA Section of Family Medicine