



October 8, 2021

Dear Family Physicians,

In the time since I last wrote to you, Alberta's COVID-19 situation has gone from bad to worse. Over the past few weeks, Albertans have watched in dismay as hospitalizations and ICU admissions climbed and our health system buckled. The Government of Canada and the Red Cross have dispatched medical personnel to assist in Alberta ICUs, which at the time of writing of this Bulletin, were at 179% their normal capacity. The images of the Canadian military nurses arriving in our province created mixed emotions. While we are grateful they are here, it seems unfathomable it has come to this.

At the same time, in-school transmission has exploded across the province, with 54 schools currently experiencing outbreaks and more than 700 on alert status. As of October 5, Albertans aged 5-19 accounted for 25% of the province's active cases, with a growing number of children being hospitalized – including babies under the age of one. I know many family physicians are seeing similar trends in our practices, with more young children and their families presenting with COVID-19 symptoms. As we head into the Thanksgiving long weekend, it is more important than ever that Albertans follow public health measures, including limits on social gatherings, so we do not see another post-holiday uptick in cases – especially among the many children that are still not eligible for vaccination.

Time for stronger measures

Not surprisingly, much of the recent AMA Fall Representative Forum focused on the escalating COVID-19 crisis and the need to advocate for a stronger response from government. RF Delegates passed several motions intended to address the urgent need for our province to take definitive action to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and increase vaccination rates. This included motions focused on improving vaccine uptake, increasing support for HCWs, and putting supports in place for delayed care. One of the most urgent priorities to emerge from RF was the need for a firebreak, and on Monday, September 27, the AMA issued a [press release](#) asking the government to institute a short, sharp break that would reduce the spread of infection and reduce pressure on our health care system.

SFM and SRM wrote our own [open letter to Albertans](#) echoing the need for a firebreak and encouraging people to get vaccinated and follow public health restrictions. I know from the comments and sharing our letter received, that this message resonated with many of you who have been tirelessly advocating for ways to protect your patients and our health care system. Several other sections within the AMA have issued similar calls to action and yesterday the AMA issued another [media release](#) calling for stronger measures, including mandatory vaccinations for public gatherings, schools and workplaces. While we wait to see if the government will listen to the advice of the AMA and other concerned Albertans, family physicians will continue to try to inform and support our patients in doing what is necessary to protect themselves and the people they care about.

Taking care of yourself

Providing primary care during a pandemic has been immensely stressful and I know many of us have faced personal struggles as well as financial pressures that are threatening the survivability of our practices. I want to remind you there is help available through the AMA's Physician and Family Support Program. Please do not hesitate to reach out, 24/7 to 1-877-767-4637 – they are there whenever you need them.

Unfortunately, I have also heard from some of you that there has been an increase in situations where patients have been aggressive in their refusal to mask during appointments or demanding mask or vaccine exemptions. Some physicians have been sworn at and even threatened. This is completely unacceptable. Late last year, the CPSA published an article entitled [Safety In Care Settings – What Physicians Can Do](#), that provides some suggestions and links to additional resources. The CPSA has also published [Guidance for physicians: Requests for COVID-19 vaccination exemptions](#) and [COVID-19: Challenging Situations](#), which offers direction on dealing with patients who refuse to wear a mask and how to handle requests for sick notes or mask exemption letters. Although you are already familiar with these resources, it may be helpful to revisit them and share them with your clinic staff, who may also experience difficult interactions or requests from patients. I also hope you will reach out to your colleagues, who can offer advice based on their own experiences, and to your SFM Executive so we can continue to share your concerns.

Summary from engagement initiative to be shared soon

Throughout August and September, SFM, along with the Section of Rural Medicine and Primary Care Network Physician Leads Executive, undertook an engagement strategy that hosted informal member conversations in zones across the province. We also created a confidential member survey to help gather experiences about the issues impacting practice survivability and surveyed members of the public. We are currently in the process of summarizing the findings so we can use the information to help guide our future advocacy efforts. Once a summary is available, we will share it with you.

This is, without doubt, one of the most difficult times to be a physician in Alberta. It is also a time when your voice is more important than ever. I know we are all exhausted and the challenges can seem insurmountable, but I also know family physicians are resilient, resourceful, and relentless in delivering the care our patients need and deserve.

As always, if there is anything you would like to discuss, please reach out to me directly at sfmpres@albertadoctors.org.

Best regards,



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