

July 30, 2020

Honourable Jason Kenney
Premier, President of the Executive Council, Minister of Intergovernmental Relations
Members of Executive Council
Executive Branch
307 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

via: premier@gov.ab.ca

Dear Premier Kenney,

I am writing you today on behalf of Alberta's physicians, resident physicians and medical students to request your personal attention and assistance in resolving a matter of profound consequence to Albertans.

As I am sure you are aware, over the past year there has been considerable tension between Alberta's physicians and the Minister of Health, Tyler Shandro. Not wishing to chronicle the many contributing events, it is sufficient for me to say that the relationship between Alberta's Minister of Health and Alberta's physicians is at an historic low today. In fact, it is toxic and poses a real barrier to moving forward.

As a result, the AMA recently conducted a Confidence Vote Referendum on the Minister of Health. A total of 8,934 physicians, resident physicians and medical students from across Alberta took part in this vote, which was conducted with the same rigour as a contract ratification vote. The results could not be clearer. Fully 98% of members say they have lost confidence in Minister Shandro's ability to manage the health care system. Over the past year, Mr. Shandro's words and actions have created a chaotic state in the health care system and have alienated most of those responsible for actually delivering care within it. In voting as they have done regarding confidence in the Minister, our members have asked the AMA to appeal to you directly in an effort to find a positive, amicable resolution.

We offer a couple of points in support of this appeal. First, physicians are not your adversaries. We genuinely wish to find a fair and reasonable resolution with your government. We understand your desire to flatten health care spending and introduce new, positive innovations into the health care system, and we are ready and willing to help.

Second, the AMA is not an "interest group", as the Minister is fond of saying. We represent the thousands of physicians who actually deliver the care to patients. This caregiving function is combined with a stewardship role in a public health care system, where physicians help balance the need for efficiency with responsible and quality care for patients. The Minister's actions, that dismiss our voice simply because it doesn't necessarily agree with his on certain issues, are disheartening and disturbing to say the least.

Third, since our previous agreement was terminated in February, we have made it very clear to government that our only demand is to have a fair and reasonable negotiation of a new province-wide agreement, which

respects our rights to arbitration as essential workers. This is not an unreasonable or unachievable goal, yet to date, we have found no willingness from government to do so.

Instead, response from the Minister has been a combination of indifference and hostility. The almost daily efforts at character assassination by the Minister, more often than not using false and manipulated information, are untenable.

Here is just one example. For months, the Minister has complained publicly that the AMA has never tabled a proposal with him. This is blatantly and ridiculously untrue, to the point that we actually felt the need to publish our last offer to government in the newspaper. The Minister's reaction was: "It's a stunt." "It's not a real offer." "They didn't sign it." He has since shifted to implicitly acknowledging that it was in fact "a real offer", but complains it is insufficient and government does not actually need an agreement with doctors anyway. I would suggest Premier, that when 98% of physicians lack confidence and trust in a Minister of Health, reaching a negotiated province-wide agreement could not be more of a priority.

The fact of the matter is that AMA has tabled numerous offers with government over the past few months. Early on in discussions, we offered an across-the-board cut of 5% to all physician fee codes, but this was flatly rejected by Alberta Health. They told us they were not interested in a piecemeal fee reduction approach, and rather wanted an agreement which takes into account the entire budget envelope for physician compensation (i.e., \$5.4 Billion or \$4.6 Billion depending on how AHS physician services are accounted for).

We took this direction and developed a new three-year proposal, which satisfied the government's demand and we submitted it on July 1. This is the same proposal that was published in the newspapers and it was - and still is - a very real, good faith effort and strong proposal.

In essence, provided physicians are given commensurate responsibilities for managing the budget, we are able to agree to capping compensation at its current level, recognizing that service levels would also need to be held constant to some measure. Holding the line on compensation under this proposal means that physicians would, in large part, take on the risk of managing inflation, aging and population growth. This is a significant offer as these elements drive demand for spending increases of roughly 4% annually to the budget envelope.

The only outstanding matter related to this approach is addressing the issue of funding new doctors being added to the system. As you may be aware, under Bill 21 the provision of new Practice IDs (PraciDs) is now the sole responsibility of the Minister and Alberta Health, and we strongly believe that budget responsibility and accountability should flow with that control. If the Minister wanted to freeze spending, it would be entirely within his abilities not to issue any new PraciDs over and above current levels.

We do not recommend this. There are clearly areas of the province that need more physicians, but it requires a collaborative approach and recognition that doctors are willing to take on responsibility for other growth pressures on the budget. We have told AH that we are very willing to work with them to develop a multi-year, needs based assessment and plan for physician supply, but at this stage we are struggling to merely have our proposals be treated as actual proposals.

With this background Premier, we hope that you are better able to understand the current sense of frustration and anxiety among physicians in Alberta today. Please be aware that physicians are ultimately held legally responsible for the care they provide. Consequently, we have a vested interest in supporting high quality care. Our appeal to you is very genuine and is made in good faith.

Ultimately, I believe there are important perspectives that we can share:

- That we need to build a respectful and effective relationship between government and physicians.
- That our main goal is to deliver to Albertans the care and services they need.
- That especially in these challenging times, Alberta taxpayers need to be assured that they are receiving value for dollars. This includes managing the budget for physician services.

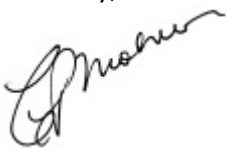
We are not making any demands of you beyond requesting your attention and consideration of this important matter. You could certainly replace the Minister, but that is not what we are asking. You could use your “good offices” to encourage a more constructive dialogue and bring the parties together to negotiate a new agreement. You could appoint an independent third party to arbitrate a new agreement. The options are entirely yours to choose, but we feel strongly that this matter requires your personal attention and are therefore requesting it.

For over a century, the AMA has been the voice of doctors and patients in Alberta. We are an advocate and deliberative body, and since the introduction of Medicare, we are the sole representative of physicians in negotiating with government. Our interest is to help steward the public health care system in a manner that delivers excellent care in an efficient way. We have no interest in wresting power from the Minister. The provincial government has absolute control over health care, should they choose to wield it in that manner, but with that authority flows responsibility and accountability for the consequences.

Premier, we are physicians, not an interest group. We have no desire to fight with your government, but we feel it is necessary to negotiate a fair and reasonable agreement with it. In addition, we are appealing to you as the leader of the province to help us find a way through this impasse.

On behalf of the AMA Board, our physician and student members, and all of our patients, I am requesting a meeting with you at your earliest possible convenience to discuss this matter further, and hopefully find some common ground on which we can build a positive way forward.

Sincerely,



Christine P. Molnar, MD, FRCPC
President, Alberta Medical Association

cc: AMA Members