

May 18, 2023

Family Doctors Need Your Help – An open letter to Albertans

Dear Albertans,

Family doctors care for you at every age and stage of your life. We are with you through your struggles and have the tremendous honour of your trust. We chose this profession because of the opportunity to truly know and care for our patients. It is a privilege and an honour to walk alongside our patients in this way...but it is a job that is becoming harder and harder to do.

Strain on hospitals and specialty physician care has increased due to COVID-19, a growing and aging population with increasingly complex needs, and inadequate hospital capacity. As resources dwindle, more work is transferred to family doctors—to care for patients as they await delayed referral appointments, imaging, and surgeries.

The part of our work we love—time with our patients—continues to decrease as we navigate increasing administrative blocks. *Revisiting the Time Needed to Provide Adult Primary Care* (research published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* in July 2022¹) found that primary care physicians would need to work over 26 hours a day to provide comprehensive care (preventative, chronic disease and acute care, plus administrative tasks). Even with physician-led team-based care, primary care physicians were estimated to need over 16 hours a day. Clearly this is not ideal.

Time with our families is sacrificed as we work more evenings, weekends, and holidays. Many patients don't realize we have no benefits or pension plans; we are small business owners who must cover the cost of running our practices. We struggle to pay our staff what they deserve while still managing to cover our clinic bills, support our families, and save for retirement. Adding to these pressures, it has become increasingly difficult to find doctors to cover for vacations, maternity leaves, or physician illness. It's hard to care for patients when your own health is at risk.

As family doctors, we expect to work hard for our patients, but the sheer enormity of the workload is taking its toll. The most recent Canadian Medical Association National Physician Health survey² shows that physicians are experiencing unprecedented levels of depression and other psychological distress, with a sharp increase in respondents reporting burnout and suicidal ideation compared to the 2017 survey. In addition, nearly half of respondents noted they are considering reducing their clinical work. Many of our Alberta colleagues have already made the difficult decision to change their practices, leave their communities, or retire early.

Why should this matter to you? Because having a family doctor makes a measurable difference in your health. Research has consistently shown lower costs and better health outcomes when family physicians are accessible and plentiful³. We keep our patients out of the acute care system and help them stay healthy longer. In the Alberta health care system, over half the daily services are provided by family physicians for less than 10% of total health care spending.

Family medicine is efficient, high-value care at a relatively low price. Much of our value comes from the relationships we have with our patients and our knowledge of their history and health care needs. Alberta must retain the family physicians we have and make comprehensive family medicine more appealing if we hope to recruit new physicians. Family doctors want the government to meaningfully engage with us. We have solutions, we have our patient’s needs close to our hearts (because those same needs also matter to us and our own families), and we want to put patients first.

In this upcoming election and beyond, we must demand that the government listens to all Albertans—including nurses and doctors, EMTs, and firefighters—and take considered action to invest in Alberta’s future. What we need now, and for the next four years, is a government that understands the current crisis and need for stability—a government that makes commitments and keeps its word. You have the power to advocate for family doctors and the resources needed for your health. During this provincial election, please talk to your candidates. Ask them what their plan is to retain and attract the family doctors Albertans so desperately need. After the election, hold government accountable for its health care promises. The future of our health care system depends on it.

Sincerely,

Dr. Katherine Kasha
Family Medicine Co-chair
AMA Joint Physician Advocacy Committee

1. Porter, J., Boyd, C., Skandari, M.R. *et al.* Revisiting the Time Needed to Provide Adult Primary Care. *J GEN INTERN MED* **38**, 147–155 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-022-07707-x>
2. <https://www.cma.ca/physician-wellness-hub/resources/national-physician-health-survey-reports>
3. <https://acfp.ca/advocacy/the-value-of-a-family-physician/>