

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Medical students speak out on primary and acute care

What does the Physician Comprehensive Care Model mean for health care?

Arguably, the most significant announcement regarding health care from the 2024 Alberta budget was the promise to implement a new funding model for primary care that is competitive with other western provinces. This has been a long process, but it can completely reshape how health care is provided in this Alberta.

Although the focus has mostly been on primary care, acute care also needs support. Wait times in emergency rooms have ballooned, and many hospitals are at or over capacity. The quality of care in emergency rooms is rapidly declining, which will impact the health of Albertans and their loved ones.

What does the new model mean for primary care?

The new funding model for primary care is a long-awaited development. Primary care physicians are the backbone of our health care system, handling everything from routine check-ups to chronic disease management. However, the administrative burden on these doctors is immense, often leading to long working hours and burnout. It's not just about the money — it's about creating a sustainable system where primary care physicians can provide quality care without the risk of burnout.

The budget's promise to alleviate some of these pressures with the Physician Comprehensive Care Model is encouraging. The government applied federal primary care funding toward transitional sustainability payments for eligible physicians while the new model was being developed. This was appreciated, but there has been little movement since then. We need to ensure that changes are implemented quickly and effectively so that primary care receives the support it needs to thrive.

What is the current status of acute care?

One of the biggest reasons emergency room physicians (EPs) have been struggling is that two-thirds of emergency visits happen after 5 p.m., on weekends, and on holidays. Emergencies don't stop, so our emergency doctors can't stop. Constant stress has caused them to be the medical specialty with the shortest lifespan. Yet the way EPs get paid doesn't reflect their difficult job. They have no incentives to work irregular hours even though this work is demanding and taxing. They also sometimes work for free. Doctors are obligated to look after all patients even if they don't have identification or an Alberta Health Care Insurance Plan number, allowing doctors to bill the government for their service. The inadequate compensation they get for their intense hours and schedules has led to significant burnout, which makes it challenging to provide care to everyone walking through those emergency room doors. The current way ER doctors are treated is a critical reason acute care is struggling.

Albertans can have medical emergencies on any day and at any hour, so acute care doctors must be available to work anytime. Nobody wants to be up in the middle of the night during the holiday weekends. Still, acute care physicians do it anyway because they care about the health and well-being of all Albertans, no matter the situation. If we want to show acute care doctors they are valued and respected, we must ensure that burnout doesn't occur/is reduced. The government needs to take concrete action to prove acute care doctors matter; until that happens, acute care in Alberta will continue to struggle.

Medical students' perspective

As medical students, we see firsthand the struggles primary and acute care physicians face when we're in hospitals and medical clinics. The long hours, administrative burdens and inadequate compensation create a challenging work environment. There is an opportunity to address these issues and create a more sustainable health care system for future generations of physicians and patients, making medical students more likely to choose these specialties for their future careers.

Although the Alberta government has expressed willingness to make a significant investment in health care, examining whether investments meet primary and acute care needs is crucial. Words are not enough. The time for action is now. By focusing on sustainable funding models, fair compensation and reducing administrative burdens, we can work towards a health care system that effectively serves our physicians and patients. The path forward requires careful consideration and action to ensure that every Albertan receives the care they deserve.

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