

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Valedictory address from immediate past president

As my tenure as president comes to a close, I find myself reflecting on a challenging and rewarding year. Looking back, I am proud of what the Alberta Medical Association tackled this year.

We have made great strides in our work to support Healthy Working Environments – a long overdue initiative. We all know physicians that have suffered burnout. We know the toll this takes on us, our families, our jobs and our patients. Together, we are ensuring that all physicians are supported in their work environment with positive leadership, self-care and gender equity, diversity and inclusion.

One important step along the path to Healthy Working Environments this year was Well Doc Alberta – an initiative that reminds us how important self-care is. It can be simple things like taking breaks, eating lunch, taking time away from work to rejuvenate and spending time with people who are important to us.

This year we also looked at our Association through a lens of gender equity, diversity and inclusion. It is imperative that we all see ourselves reflected in our leadership, and are encouraged and supported to contribute without barriers.

We examined how we could be a part of a more supportive system, by bringing together the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta, Alberta Health Services and the medical schools. We committed to ensuring a culture where health care team members are respected and valued so that we can reach our full potential, improving patient outcomes and sustaining the system along the way.

Last fall saw the AMA recognized in legislation as the sole representative for physicians in negotiations related to financial matters. This was particularly important for academic physicians who have never previously had someone at their side, protecting their interests in contract renewals. I have had the opportunity to participate in development meetings and the message of gratitude is clear.

We have brought the diverse world of laboratory physicians together to talk about what our health care system needs and give them an advisory voice with the Health Minister as he evaluates provincial laboratory services.

We clarified our relationship with the Canadian Medical Association and laid groundwork for more collaboration to support members. While we no longer have conjoined fees, I believe our provincial concerns are better served by having a strong national voice. Our joint work on Well Doc Alberta – under a first-in-Canada Memorandum of Understanding between our organizations – highlights how both associations can support common initiatives from different advocacy platforms.

I have been pleased with the Shine A Light initiative that I put forward in my inaugural address. It is time we recognize grassroots physicians and the tremendous service they give to their patients and the system. We have nominations pouring in from both patients and colleagues. I have enjoyed reading every one of them and sending letters of congratulations to the recipients.

Although our accomplishments have given us great momentum, we still face many challenges ahead.

Chief among these is the change that resulted from the provincial election. Every change in mandate brings altered priorities that flow from the government of the day. Budgetary concerns have been top-of-mind for our new government and this was made very clear with the Blue Ribbon Panel report. Sustainability of the system is essential. However, quality care must not be sacrificed for the sake of savings.

We have a long history of working with governments toward common goals and now, more than ever, it is important to ensure they understand the real implications their decisions have on patient care. We need to help the Minister and his team understand that long-term vision in health care system reform is essential. We cannot just think in terms of four-year political cycles. If politicians are only focused on the budgetary line, they are missing an opportunity to work with physicians to see longer term progress in health system reform.

As we are approaching negotiations, we should remember our strong history of coming to mutual agreement. Negotiations are an opportunity to innovate. Previous negotiations have proven this. This is where the groundwork was laid for the Physician Office System Program. Alberta now has the highest uptake of the electronic medical record in clinics in the country.

Primary Care Networks are another initiative created through negotiations. Alberta is leading the way in Canada in terms of the Patient's Medical Home. The College of Family Physicians of Canada released its Patient's Medical Home Provincial Report Card this year and Alberta is far ahead of other provinces due to the activities of our PCNs.

Alberta is also driving forward on the Income Equity Initiative in our Physician Compensation strategy. I say "driving forward" because I know that is what the Board has been doing – but as everyone knows, the work is difficult and there have definitely been challenges. There is a reason we do not hear about other provinces working on these goals. It is hard – but that does not mean we give up. Deep discussion occurred around the Board table and we remain committed to fairness and equity in physician funding.

One of the true pleasures for me this year has been the opportunity to connect with so many physicians around the province. Through our interactions, I have gained insight into our members and I have been continually impressed by the level of commitment and dedication to our profession that exists across the membership.

While system constraints can be frustrating, we never lose sight of our main objective – getting the patient in front of us the best care possible. It is clear to me that what is best for our patients is what drives us. While it can often leave us frustrated, it is also the source of the greatest satisfaction in our jobs. Those connections we make with our patients, their families and our colleagues are what fulfills us. We must never lose sight of that.

Our organization is strong. Governments may come and go, but we are here for the duration. Our commitment to our profession and to each other will get us to the future we need to see in health care. We are all part of that future and as we face challenges ahead, we cannot forget this. We must remain united and constant.

It has been an honor to be your president.

- *Dr. Alison M. Clarke*

Banner photo credit: Curtis Comeau