



The Government of Alberta has not prepared physicians for the pandemic back-to-school season

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The back-to-school season typically brings a higher volume of ill children with symptoms similar to COVID-19. The Government of Alberta has not prepared the health system for this surge in COVID-19 symptoms. Physicians have not received appropriate instruction and support to work with schools and parents, despite parents being directed by Government to contact their family physician for COVID-19 advice on their school re-entry website.

The regular cold and flu season will likely coincide with a surge of COVID-19 in the community. Frequently a child will come to our clinics with a fever. During a typical September the child may have meningitis, kidney infection, strep throat, or bacterial phenomena. Diagnosing the illness requires assessing the child in the clinic and testing as virtual care is not sufficient in these cases. All family physicians are on alert for COVID-19 symptoms of fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, runny nose, and/or shortness of breath which may be a number of other illnesses. This year we must take additional precautions because the usual symptoms may also be COVID-19.

Family physicians have not received clinic guidelines nor a plan from the Government for how the health system and family clinics will prepare to manage the additional volume. Family clinics do not receive personal protective equipment (PPE) from Government while hospitals and COVID-19 assessment centers do. We have not received any instruction or support for the inevitable increase in symptomatic children coming to our clinics.

Without the Government preparing clinics with guidelines and PPE we will likely see additional strain on our emergency rooms and assessment centers. We, family physicians, want to provide appropriate continuity of care for our patients. We have always been the first connection for our patients to receive care. The Government must provide a plan to safely guide the system to not overload our emergency rooms and COVID-19 assessment centers.

How do physicians educate and support families, children, parents, and teachers? We are also concerned about return to work guidelines for teachers and children in the event of symptoms and a COVID-19 swab result (negative or positive). Government has not provided clear direction specifically to physicians to address this for our patients.

We require guidance documents answering many COVID-19 questions for parents and teachers. Examples of frequently asked questions to include are: 1) a child has a runny nose, what do I do?; 2) a child had a COVID-19 test two weeks ago and now has diarrhea, what do I do?; 3) a classmate of my child tested positive for COVID-19, do my child and I need to be tested?; 4) my child tested positive four days ago but now my child has a runny nose, what do I do?; 5) are there symptoms that child get that do not require a test?; 6) how often could kids potentially need to be swabbed?; and 7) how long does a COVID-19 test last? There are many common questions parents and teachers have. This requires guidance resources from Government to provide our community.

Our colleagues are apprehensive about sick notes requiring children and school staff to come into our clinics. Requesting sick notes for self-isolation or return to work increases unnecessary risk for patients, clinic staff, and physicians when people should be immediately recuperating safely at home. A directive

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from the Government instructing educational institutions and parents to not seek sick notes during the pandemic for staff and students is needed to keep our communities safe.

The Government continues to leave physicians high and dry during this pandemic. The lack of preparedness, foresight, and support adds unnecessary risk of exposure to COVID-19 for our colleagues and communities. We call upon the Government of Alberta to rectify these issues outlined above for the safety of our children, parents, teachers, and communities.

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