

March 16, 2020

The Honourable Tyler Shandro
Minister of Health
423 Legislature Building
10800 97 Avenue
Edmonton AB T5K 2B6

Dear Minister Shandro:

Re: COVID-19 Doctors Immediately Need Government to Declare Virtual Care

This letter is to address physician's immediate need for the Government of Alberta to declare virtual care. The Edmonton Zone Medical Staff Association (EZMSA) represents 1,600 physicians for local issues in the Edmonton zone. As physicians in the Edmonton zone, we are extremely troubled about the lack of readiness by this government for COVID-19.

The virus is now spreading between community members within Alberta, not only from travelers. This is a critical time to contain the virus before Alberta sees the pandemic reach Italian levels. "Our window to flatten the curve of the epidemic is narrow," Dr. Theresa Tam said at a news conference. "We all need to act now. Coronavirus is a serious public health threat." The Government must start a fee code that allows doctors to perform virtual care with their patients through phone and video calls. They must also stop all non-emergency care. Time is running short to "flatten the curve".

Virtual Care

Doctors need a fee code from the government to perform virtual care. The current Alberta fee code was intended for H1N1 10 years ago. It is only to be used if a patient has coronavirus symptoms for them to call their doctor. This code is only \$20 per call. If a doctor completes 40 calls in one day, this would be \$800, which is not enough to sustain a practice with staff, rent, and bills. Ontario has a virtual fee code. Ontario remunerates physicians for videoconferencing at the same rate as face-to-face with an additional premium of \$35 for the first patient seen in a 24-hour period, and \$15 for each subsequent patient, recognizing the additional time and attention required to provide a complete virtual consultation.

A virtual care fee code would be for doctors self-isolating to continue patient care from home and for critically ill patients to stay at home and call their doctor. The virtual care fee code is urgently needed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus before it is too late. Social distancing one month earlier reduces overall infection by two million. Doctors must be given a fee code to support social distancing.



Stop Non-emergency Care

The Government must immediately stop all non-emergency care and do everything to prevent the spread between patients. Non-emergency care includes visits like chronic disease management, any issue that may be diagnosed and treated virtually, and routine visits such as annual physical exams and preventative screening. The Government must implement a policy for patients not to go to walk in clinics because it is a hot spot for spread. Family clinics desperately need a plan from government to protect patients and staff. In absence of any government directive, family doctors have been inventing their own measures such as barricading the public one metre away from their staff and requesting patients stay in their car until phoned into the clinic.

The Government of Alberta has left family doctors out of their pandemic planning. This is a fatal decision that Albertan lives do not have the time to make.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ernst Schuster
President, Edmonton Zone Medical Staff Association

AF/bjh

CC: Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Chief Medical Officer of Health
Lorna Rosen, Deputy Minister of Health
Dr. Verna Yiu, President & CEO, AHS
Dr. Scott McLeod, Registrar, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta