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## BC's minister of health on the future of medicine

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By: **Mike Farnworth, MLA**



As health minister, I am concerned about the challenges currently facing the system—not to mention the challenges that await us all in the future. And I believe that it is only through cooperation and consultation that we will overcome those challenges.



If we're going to achieve success in the future, we'll need to rely on the advice of the experts: BC's doctors.



I believe we share a common goal with doctors—protecting and improving access to care for all residents, and to use every opportunity to help improve the health of British Columbians.



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The success of our efforts so far has, in part, been due to your commitment and dedication to improving patient care, and I am confident this commitment will be a significant factor in our future success.

As a government, we are committed to doing our part, by continuing to ensure the system is funded to meet the needs of patients. The BC government spends more than one-third of its budget on health care—and we know that costs will continue to increase.

We continue to hear the concerns of doctors about the way the current system is delivering care. We know these concerns come from a desire to do what you were educated to do—provide care for your patients.

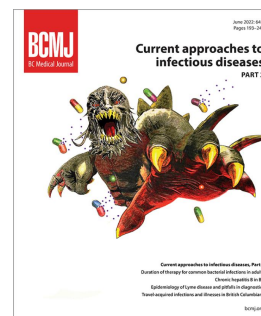
We're hearing from some doctors that they face obstacles to providing the best care possible—that they're spending too much time on administration, and not enough with their patients.

In our northern and rural communities, doctors are telling us they're concerned about access and continuity of care for their patients.

We recognize the pressure doctors feel when they are unable to attract locums to their communities, and we respect the anxiety doctors feel when they approach retirement and wonder who's going to care for their patients.

Clearly, we cannot simply accept the way we currently do things as the best and only way. We need to look at ways to organize the system better to increase access for patients, improve working conditions for physicians, and measure the performance of the system as a whole.

As a new Minister of Health, I am struck by government's inability to ensure medical services in communities, despite the fact that government



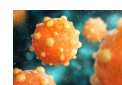
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funds those services. I want to hear your ideas on how we can improve the design of the system to assure public access to high-quality medical care. Together we're going to have to respond to the demands from the public for better integration of care.

If you desire new arrangements in primary care, for example—and recent polls conducted by the CMA clearly show that many doctors do—then we need to make changes.

In recent months, we have heard a lot from the federal government and Health Minister Allan Rock about the need for primary care reform. In BC we have seven such demonstration projects underway that offer interdisciplinary care provided by doctors, nurses, and other health practitioners.

It is expected this model will provide better access to care for patients and a more sustainable practice for professionals. In my short time as health minister, I have already heard stories about doctors saying they feel burnt out. I believe together we need to find a way to renew our health-care system to have one that cares for the needs of practitioners, as well as patients.

Health-care providers everywhere are looking very closely at the experiments we are now undertaking in primary care, since British Columbia is not alone in needing to find better ways to fund and deliver care.

The international context of the changes in health care will also pose challenges for the future of medicine here in BC. For example, a recent World Trade Organization decision against Canada in a dispute over patents may end up resulting in higher drug costs—and that's just the tip of the iceberg.

Consider the developments in the European Union, which already allow for the free movement of doctors between nations. Globalization may increase the migration of physicians to Canada. We want to be prepared for that, and I'm sure doctors—facing increased competition for their services—will also want to be ready.

Clearly, we are going to have to cope with developments both inside and outside the medical profession that are going to seriously affect the way we manage and deliver health care.

Despite the challenges facing health care, I am optimistic that the publicly funded system can meet the needs of patients. I look forward to working with the doctors of BC.

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Mr Farnworth, MLA for Port Coquitlam, has been minister of health since 28 February 2000.

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