

Time for government to make the right choices

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THERE IS NO DOUBT HSA members are angry about the way they were treated by the government in the last round of contract negotiations. But I still find it striking to recognize the source of this anger is not concern for themselves ... its their deep concern for the future of health care and the needs of their patients.


Last month, more than 60 delegates elected by members at regional meetings gathered for a three-day bargaining proposal conference. Delegates assessed proposals from the membership, elected representatives to the bargaining committee, and engaged in frank and pragmatic discussions about the next round of bargaining.

What emerged is very clear: members are looking for fairness and respect in the upcoming round of bargaining. They want fair recognition of the essential role health science professionals play in the modern health care system, because continuing to fall behind our counterparts in other provinces is simply not an option. Not if we want to put a stop to growing health care wait lists. Not if we want to ensure that our patients get the care they need, when and where they need it. And not if we want a health care system that is prepared for the challenges of the future.

If the Liberal government chooses not to recognize our members with a reasonable increase in wages, BC will lose whatever competitive edge we have left in hiring the people who hold our health care system together. This province is already bleeding highly-trained health science professionals to other provinces where wages are more competitive and housing costs more affordable. An ultrasound technologist just starting out in Alberta will make \$6 an hour more than in BC. In other cases the wage differential can be as high as \$10 an hour.

The facts are stark, but members know bargaining will not be easy. The governments -net zero" mandate has merely been renamed ... the -cooperative gains" will be just as restrictive. Delegates to the conference were well aware of this, just as they are well aware that deteriorating economic conditions will force governments to make tough choices for the years ahead.

So lets take a good hard look at those choices. Will the government choose economic growth? Over 85 per cent of our membership is female, and many of those women are the primary source of income for their families. Dollars paid to these professionals go right back into the economy and promote healthy growth. Or will it choose to continue its dubious approach to business tax cuts? These have cost us close to \$16 billion over the last decade, but its a poor investment. Corporate profits are up but capital investment, including job creation, is down. Will the government choose a sustainable path for the health care system that supports a productive workforce and provides a worldwide competitive advantage? Or will it continue to chip away at the system, rationing needed health services, leaving the sick and vulnerable to wait longer, travel further and, ultimately, incur more costly care?

For the sake of patients, and for the sake of the economy, its time for the government to make the right choices. 

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