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Alleged intimidation of doctors can't be ignored

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When the issue of the Redford government's astounding U-turn on a judicial health-care inquiry came up for discussion at our editorial board meeting Wednesday, a colleague commented that readers' eyes might be starting to glaze over at the subject.

Sadly, he is probably right. But this public apathy is what will allow Premier Alison Redford to get away with her outrageously broken promise; one that some pundits agree is a brilliant move, politically.

There's nothing brilliant about what the government has done in terms of improving health care or the lives of Albertans.

Instead of holding a judicial inquiry into doctor intimidation, of which there is ample evidence it is widespread, the province announced a public inquiry into queue jumping, hoping no one will understand or care about the distinction.

Queue jumping was hardly raised as a concern. It was mentioned in a speech to a Toronto audience by the former CEO of Alberta Health Services, Stephen Duckett, who himself was fired. If they didn't listen to Duckett when he was being paid to fix the health-care system, why are they listening to him now? Duckett, in that same speech, said he took action to put an immediate end to the practice.

He corrected the problem. He stopped the so-called "political class" from getting better access to health care than the average Albertan. So why are we having an inquiry into queue jumping?

Because Redford is now twisting the very words she used so successfully for political gain during the leadership race. She's trying to say her promise, all along, was to investigate queue jumping. This is true, but it also originally included queue jumping and political interference.

The June 7 release, with the headline: "Alison Redford calls for Judicial Inquiry," was in reaction to that day's news of Duckett's speech. Redford made it clear this latest allegation of political interference was the final straw, not the primary reason. The release said Duckett's "statement, when combined with earlier allegations of a culture of intimidation, has provided the impetus to call for an independent inquiry."

Duckett was hardly raising the alarm bell on an issue he thought was of pressing importance. He merely made the comments to a medical audience at a low-key event last May that wasn't even covered by the media or reported on until a month later. Meanwhile, physicians, opposition members and medical groups have been screaming since 2009 that doctors who

advocate on behalf of their patients are being bullied by health-care officials. They have been alleging high-level political interference. Liberal Leader Raj Sherman believes 250 patients died while waiting for lung surgery, and that thoracic surgeons who advocated on their behalf, were gagged. Dr. Ciaran McNamee, the former head of thoracic surgery for Capital Health in Edmonton, launched a lawsuit in 2001 against the former health region and two senior officials. In it, he claimed he had been forced from his job and had his competency and mental health questioned after he raised concerns about lung-cancer patient resources with Conservative MLAs and the deputy health minister.

The lawsuit was settled in 2006 without going to trial, so none of the allegations were proven. But the questions and speculation linger.

Rumours have been swirling for years, and the air needs to be cleared, but that can't happen if doctors like McNamee, who were forced to quit, don't have the protection of the courts to break non-disclosure agreements to testify. People need to be able to come forward to speak freely so that the problems can be understood, and therefore fixed.

The ground work for this masterful political sleight of hand was laid last week, when the Alberta Health Quality Council, in its closed-door inquiry, curiously concluded a judicial inquiry into doctor intimidation is unnecessary.

That move defied logic, as the council found plenty of evidence that a culture of fear and alienation exists among doctors, who experience intimidation and muzzling when advocating for patients.

It also recommended:

"The government of Alberta take no further action, and not establish a judicial or health inquiry to examine:

- "The allegation of a list of 1,200 patients on a lung surgery wait list or patients who may have died who were on such a list.

- "The allegation regarding the roles and actions of former health ministers, the former CEO of Capital Health, and the Registrar of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta.

- "The allegation that the physicians who raised the issues regarding a 1,200 patient waiting list were either punished or driven out of the province, or paid millions to buy their silence and the costs buried in the books under the former regional health authority."

In other words, Albertans should accept that the limited scope of the health council's investigation was enough to put the issue to rest, even though it didn't get to the bottom of anything. Albertans are expected to ignore the fact the scope was only expanded to include doctor intimidation at the last minute, under extreme political pressure and after some doctors went public. Or, that the methodology consisted of four sources of information for the review, the most compelling of which was a provincewide survey of physicians and a voluntary interview process.

The real tragedy is the public will accept it because people pay very little attention. As my colleague suggested, does anyone care?

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