

SMA: New president calls for more use of physician assistants

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SASKATOON | According to Confucius, “it is only the wisest and the stupidest that cannot change,” said Dr. Joe Pfeifer in his opening address to the delegates of the fall representative assembly of the Saskatchewan Medical Association.

While not exactly sure where physicians fit in that saying, Dr. Pfeifer added that change is essential for doctors, their patients and the Canadian health-care system, and he would rather see doctors leading the way than standing on the sidelines being told what to do.

Saskatchewan doctors have already recommended innovative changes such as moving the education of medical students and residents outside of Regina and Saskatoon, establishing day-surgery centres and creating incentives for rural physicians to enhance their training to provide more services to their patients. All these innovations have occurred or are in process in Saskatchewan, but Dr. Pfeifer added two items of his own that he would like to see his colleagues consider in the coming months.

Physician assistants are being used elsewhere in Canada, are proven support to health teams and have been accredited by the CMA since 2003, he said. “This is not a nurse or a doctor wannabe. This is a focused health-care professional who supports the physician and may conduct interviews, take histories, conduct physical examinations,” said Dr. Pfeifer.

“The president of the Manitoba physician assistant association describes their profession as a way to provide a physician with four hands, and which of us doesn’t wish that we had four hands?”

Frustrated with watching other health professionals such as pharmacists, nurses and midwives circulate discussion papers that “redefine themselves and establish new scopes of practice,” Dr. Pfeifer called on his physician colleagues to become more proactive in deciding their own role in tomorrow’s health-care system.

“Physicians are responding to the changes underway among other health professionals and as long as we are responding, we will be talking about someone else’s agenda other than our own,” he said. “I believe it is time we take a more active role in these discussions and we reclaim control of this agenda.”

Dr. Pfeifer proposed that the assembly “begin the process of putting to paper a vision for the role of the physician within the changing health-care environment for the next decade and beyond.

“If we leave it to the other professionals to define their roles, they will by default be defining ours. For the sake of our patients, it is incumbent upon physicians to demonstrate the leadership that is expected from us. In very real terms, the future of our profession demands that we do so.”

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