Registered nurses making a difference for Albertans

Speaking notes of the Honourable Sarah Hoffman, Minister of Health, from a speech given to the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA) at their centennial conference, Wednesday, March 16, 2016, 7 p.m., at the Delta Edmonton South. [check against delivery]

Introduction

Good evening everyone. Thank you for the kind introduction.

First off, I want to congratulate CARNA on its 100th anniversary! What an amazing milestone!

I’m so delighted to be here on this special occasion, and to have the honour of being invited to speak with you tonight. It’s amazing to think how far the profession of nursing has come in Alberta in the last 100 years.

As health care and technologies have become more advanced and Alberta’s health system landscape more complex, so has the practice of nursing, and you have risen to meet those challenges and changes. You have always impressed me with the time and dedication that you invest in the pursuit of excellence in the health care system, and meeting the needs of those you care for.

I have seen first-hand the difference that nursing care makes in the lives of patients as they go through some of their toughest healthcare journeys. I have a tremendous amount of respect and admiration for the work you do day in and day out to “Make a Difference for Albertans,” and I am so impressed with your centennial conference themes about making a difference:

- Partners in Care
- Improving Quality Care through Nursing Practice
- Roles of RNs/NPs in the Health System of the Future

We all owe the nursing profession a huge “thank you” for your contributions over the past century.

History of Relationship

Alberta Health and CARNA have a long collaborative relationship, and a history of cooperation. I’ve been the Health Minister for less than a year, but I know that already – together – we have made some very significant differences.
In particular, I’m thinking about the recent fentanyl overdose crisis. Working together, CARNA and Alberta Health were able to respond by increasing the access of registered nurses to resources such as take-home Naloxone kits, and allowing registered nurses to prescribe Naloxone.

I’m sure there are parents and families in Alberta who would be grieving right now if nurses were not poised for leadership and willing to redefine themselves and their role in meeting the needs of the public.

**Where do we go from here?**

This is just one example where you have met a challenge head on, and it gives me, our government, and the public tremendous confidence that there is potential to do much more.

Your potential is what CARNA and you have been exploring for a hundred years, and your potential is needed now more than ever to help us meet head on the many challenges, and many opportunities in our public health system.

One of the biggest challenges for health care in Alberta is access to primary health care, especially in rural and remote areas. We believe that many more Albertans will get the primary health care they need if we improve access to registered nurses and nurse practitioners – right where they live.

Our goal is to deliver the right health care, in the right place, at the right time, by the right health care provider.

We want to ensure we have the right number and mix of health care providers in urban, rural and remote areas to meet the needs of Albertans, regardless of where they live in the province. We encourage providers to maximize their knowledge, skills and expertise to ensure that every Albertan is as healthy as they possibly can be.

Alberta Health has been committed to working with CARNA and other stakeholders to identify how we can make that possible. We have completed two large-scale consultations, the most recent just last year. The results of those consultations have confirmed our belief that the roles of our very well educated and experienced health professionals – RNs and NPs – needs to be expanded.

In particular the consultations demonstrated overwhelming support for the role of RNs to include limited prescribing. Support was evidenced from many stakeholders:

- Alberta Health Services;
- Covenant Health;
- The Alberta College of Pharmacists;
- The College of Physicians and Surgeons; and,
- other regulatory colleges.
Alberta Health Has been doing extensive work in collaboration with CARN A, to review your current regulations, and find opportunities for an expansion of your scope of practice. The Alberta Health team is excited to complete this work, and I look forward to then bringing their recommendations before cabinet – for cabinets review, before approval.

By expanding your role as nurses within the health care team, more Albertans will benefit.

Imagine what a difference it would make if you could prescribe vaccines (other than the flu shot). What a difference that would make during an outbreak. Or imagine what a difference it would make to patients if RNs could prescribe Schedule 1 drugs (in certain circumstances). You could be the difference in saving lives during an emergency response, especially in rural and remote areas.

This change to nursing practice would help reduce wait-times for patients as you could prescribe antibiotics for common conditions and infections. By expanding your role in this way, more Albertans with chronic diseases such as asthma or diabetes could be managed more effectively and efficiently.

And imagine what it would mean for patients if (in some cases), you could speed-up assessments by ordering x-rays and diagnostic tests.

I imagine, with investment in the potential of nurses, that we will also improve health outcomes, and improve on the efficient and effective use of the public’s investment in Alberta’s health care system. Of course, these proposed changes require the collective vision and collaboration of many, but 100 years ago, so did the regulation and education of nurses.

As we have learned, there is only one way to go – and that is forward.

Any changes to the Nursing Profession Legislation won’t happen overnight. The amount of consultation and then policy development needed to change legislation is a lengthy process. But I know that CARN A has the vision, and determination to keep working with us on refining the vision of nursing in the future.

Imagine what your colleagues will be saying at this conference at the next centennial?

**Conclusion**

I have great faith that 100 years from now, our next generation will be marveling at what we were able to do and the progress we made to change the way we deliver health care in Alberta.

I wish you much success with the conference, and I look forward to continuing the great work we are doing with CARN A.

Congratulations again. Together we will make a difference for Albertans. Thank you.