The voice of family medicine

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The mission and goals of the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC) include championing high-quality health care for all Canadians, ensuring that the role of the family physician is well understood and widely valued, and being the voice of family medicine in Canada.

For most of its first 4 decades, our College Board was ambivalent about embracing public, media, and government relations as CFPC priorities; there was concern that this was not in keeping with our raison d’être. Although the CFPC advocated for the best health care for all Canadians and for support for family doctors as clinicians, teachers, researchers, and health system participants, most of the CFPC’s resources were focused on developing and stabilizing the programs related to the College’s vital educational mandate.

Since the early 1990s, however, it has been clear that our priorities also need to include fostering understanding and support for our discipline and those dedicated to it. Family medicine and family physicians committed to our College, our educational standards, and our 4 principles must be represented by a strong and unique voice. This requires effective policy development and advocacy on behalf of family physicians to all stakeholders in Canada’s health care system, including our medical and health professional colleagues and their associations, the public, media, and government.

This means that the CFPC and its Chapters must try to be part of every provincial and federal deliberation that affects family doctors and their patients. Our elected and appointed leaders need the knowledge, skills, and confidence to interact and communicate effectively with all stakeholders in health care in their respective jurisdictions. The CFPC needs to ensure the acquisition and strengthening of these skills among our leaders.

Over the past decade, our National Board has been committed to supporting the infrastructure needed to achieve these objectives. We have developed a small but highly skilled staff responsible for policy development, along with public, media, and government relations. Working together with our members, this group develops a broad cross section of CFPC position papers and responds to government health policies and positions with key messages that are immediately shared with our Chapter and university department leaders.

The CFPC policy team also submits editorials and letters to major publications and coordinates press interviews for our leaders. Each year at Family Medicine Forum (FMF), the group organizes a national media conference focused on topics of prime concern to family physicians, which has resulted in major stories carried both locally and across the country.

Family Doctor Week in Canada, which takes place each year at the time of FMF, is another initiative led by this team. During FMF, while 1500 to 2000 family doctors gather to learn and have fun together in one city, others across the country also recognize the contributions of Canada’s family doctors in different ways, including statements read by elected officials in their federal or provincial legislatures and announcements in national and local media of Canada’s Family Physicians of the Year.

On Parliament Hill in Ottawa, a CFPC government relations consultant provides an ongoing presence for our College, interacting with elected members and their key staffers and arranging meetings between our leaders and Members of Parliament, including the Minister of Health, other cabinet ministers, and opposition health critics. In February 2007, the College was featured in a special health care section of the Hill Times—the newspaper serving all Members of Parliament and their staffs.

Effective advocacy also means participating with and supporting our sister medical and health professional organizations. While we must recognize when there is need for the CFPC’s independent voice, we must also respect other associations when issues fall more squarely in their domains. Meeting regularly with the leadership of sister organizations to ensure that our members’ perspectives are clearly understood is critical. For example, while medical associations carry the responsibility of negotiating fees for all physicians, it is imperative that the CFPC and its Chapters meet with these associations to ensure that the concerns we have about income disparities between family doctors and other specialists are being appropriately addressed. It is also critical for our College to speak out publicly about this issue. Whenever possible we should strive to achieve collaboration with other organizations, recognizing the increased impact of messages delivered by professional alliances.

The CFPC’s leaders understand the importance of continuing to strengthen our advocacy role. We owe it to family doctors and their patients to be heard clearly. The future for our discipline depends on our College living up to its mandate to be the voice of family medicine in Canada.