Dr. Cindy Forbes

Valedictory Address

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Vancouver, BC
August 23, 2016

Check against delivery
Colleagues and guests — it is my great pleasure to address you this morning after what I would consider an amazing year in my life, an historic year in the history of our country, and a year of enormous challenge and great opportunity for our profession.

It has been a great honor to have travelled across this vast country — from coast to coast to coast several times — meeting with physicians, politicians and patients, and I would like to share some insights enabled by that experience.

Serving in the role of president of the CMA gives one a very unique vantage point, a window to what's happening in health care and within our profession across the country, a front row seat to the political and social influences affecting Canadians, an education in a classroom filled with great leaders from many different walks of life, the ability to connect with so many of our colleagues and perhaps most importantly, a podium from which to lead and to bring your voice, a respected voice, to the national forefront.

I leave with an even stronger conviction that collectively, we have the responsibility and the capability to positively influence the lives of all Canadians.

I believe that by agreeing to wear the chain of office of the CMA you make a promise to physicians — to ensure your voices are heard when and where they have the greatest potential to affect positive change.

For me, opportunities to do so presented themselves almost daily during the past 12 months. Leading up to the federal election, we pressed the parties to include health care — with a focus on seniors care — as part of their platforms. Through media interviews, social media, our MD/MP Contact Program, our town hall meetings, our partnership with other health and community organizations, and our social networking through DemandAPlan, we mobilized the support of thousands of individuals.

Over 30,000 Canadians sent letters and emails to MPs. We pushed and watched as the conversation shifted during the election to include health care, with a focus on many of the areas that we had identified. And now we are determined to ensure that those promises are kept, and that opportunities like the negotiation of a new Health Accord will result in improved care and improved health for Canadians.

There’s no doubt that the election of a new government in October has brought with it new opportunities for engagement. I’ve appeared before at least four parliamentary committees, and spent many days on Parliament Hill meeting with Ministers, MPs, and Senators (and recall on one particular day logging nine kilometres on my Fitbit without ever leaving Parliament Hill). I’m delighted that shortly we will have the opportunity to hear from our federal Minister of Health — and CMA member — Dr. Jane Philpott.

In December, I had the privilege of attending the Speech from the Throne and I observed our new Prime Minister mapping out a blueprint for our country. I was able to meet many of the
cabinet ministers and MPs, some of whom were attending their first Throne Speech. Many of them weren't accompanied by their staff and their reactions were fresh, honest and inviting. I was reminded that day by many different representatives — including Chief Bellegarde, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations — of the influence our collective voice can have when we advocate on behalf of our patients, especially those in greatest need. "You have a very powerful voice," he said, "and we need your help."

Many of you have communicated with me via social media, email or in person over the past year. I received heartfelt messages thanking the CMA for our advocacy on seniors care and medical assistance in dying — especially for our fierce promotion of the conscience rights of physicians.

Those of you who attended GC last year may remember the images I projected of my war canoe team as a symbol of the importance of teamwork. There's no better illustration of the power of a highly functioning team than our success in bringing the physician voice to the debate on medical assistance in dying. Our work in this area spans almost three years and involved widespread consultation with physicians, the public, our partners and politicians. It would not be an exaggeration to say that contributions from every member of the CMA team — our staff and leadership in communications, legal, policy, advocacy and education, along with the input of our elected representatives, General Council, and thousands of physician members — came together to give us one strong voice.

I do believe that we have landed in the right place at this point in time with the passage of Bill C-14 and that we will continue to lead as the conversation evolves.

One of my goals for this year — which continues to be a work in progress — was to increase the participation of our student, resident and early-career physician members in our General Council and in the work of the CMA. It’s rewarding to see so many of you in attendance today — an increase of almost 30 per cent from last year. Your presence breathes a renewed energy into the organization.

My work as president not only brought me in contact with physicians and politicians but also with patients from across the country.

Since I’m speaking to a room filled with physicians and other health care professionals, I know you’ll understand when I talk about those moments when something unexpected happens to remind you of the great privilege we have in serving others. Sometimes it’s in the context of caring for a dying patient or in welcoming a new life into the world. Or sometimes it’s a simple comment or act. Regardless, I’m always thankful for these moments.

Last month in my travels, I met a young woman from Quebec and we started talking — she eventually asked me what I did and I explained that I was a doctor but that I had temporarily taken some time away from my practice to take another position. She looked at me and said
most sincerely in a beautiful French accent that she hoped that her doctor would never do that, that she would never leave.

"You have a very important job, because a doctor", she said," can change your life". I asked her what it was about her doctor that made her feel that way. She answered: "she listened to me, she didn’t even know me at first but she believed me. She didn’t just think that I was someone who would complain if there was nothing wrong. Once or twice I called her office to speak to her and she called me back right away. I always make sure that I don't take up too much of her time because I know she’s busy but she doesn't make me feel rushed. One day I showed up for an appointment on the wrong day but she saw me anyway because she knows I have to drive a long way to see her. She relieved my mind that I could get better."

This young woman never mentioned tests, diagnosis or treatments — what I heard her describe was the compassion and respect with which she was treated and her testimony of the opportunity we have as physicians to make a huge difference in people's lives.

And that brings me to another theme that has been pervasive throughout this year — the issue of professionalism. This speaks to accountability, collegiality, compassion, and quality, as well as the values, behaviors and relationships that underpin the trust that the public has in us.

The changing role of physicians, the evolution of our profession, what it means to be a medical professional in the 21st century — the issue has been a topic on almost every PTMA agenda, at every President’s and CEO’s meeting and here at General Council. It’s a key pillar of the organizational structure of the modern CMA and it extends beyond our borders to the international medical community as well.

In Belfast in June of this year, I met with the president of the British Medical Association, Dr. Pali Hungin, who’s identified professionalism as the number one issue he wishes to address and his goal is to convene an international conference on the topic. At an informal meeting, our colleagues from the U.S., Germany, and other European countries also acknowledged the need to address this issue and plot a new course for the profession, calling for “a refreshed dialogue at the national and international level”.

The angst that our profession is feeling is clearly not simply the result of one model of care, one regional health authority or provincial government, or even one part of the world. It transcends all this — yet we, as a profession, are the only ones who can determine how we respond to these changes and challenges.

But there has been something, however, that has troubled me throughout this year when this topic has surfaced. It’s a question that was expressed recently at an awards ceremony in New Brunswick, when a retired physician in his acceptance speech was reflecting back on a very long successful career but he was also lamenting about the future of the profession. He asked the question — "Have we lost our soul?"
The question stung me at first but then I realized that I’d heard physicians ask this same question before in other forms. Some have called for a revision in our code of ethics, some have advised inward reflection and reaffirmation of our role in the health care system and some have blamed the profession for not living up to our responsibilities.

But there was something about the way it struck me that evening that kept me thinking about it for weeks. I finally realized that it was discordant with what I was observing, hearing and feeling as I listened to physicians and patients in my travels across the country.

I do not believe that we are a profession that has lost its soul. If anything I believe that the values that are reflected in the oath that we all take, the values that brought us to this profession in the first place, are as strong as they have ever been.

I do believe that we are struggling at times to live up to those values in a world that is rapidly changing, in a system that doesn’t always facilitate our ability to provide the best care in the way that we feel our patients deserve, and for many in our profession, in a political environment that is increasingly hostile, pointing the blame at the profession as financial pressures mount.

I believe that we are having trouble adapting to the shifting landscape of information, communication, technology, and expectations. That a gap exists between what society expects and what we can currently provide. I believe that we do need to redefine our role in this new paradigm, that we need to be stewards of the health care system, that we must be leaders in the transformation of health care, but I don’t believe that we have lost our soul.

I see that many are frustrated, angry and sometimes absolutely exhausted in trying to live up to our own expectations of how we care for patients, those that we had when we entered the profession. The high incidence of physician burnout is also an indication of this.

So how will we do this? How will we move forward?

We will stand together as a profession, based on our common values, always putting patients first.

We will support and respect each other as individuals, as colleagues who we care about. We will build trust by being trustworthy.

And we won’t be afraid to be accountable to our patients and to the system for those areas that we are clearly responsible.

This is not a time to point fingers or lay blame. I believe that the role that our national organization, the CMA, can play is to bring us together to have the difficult conversations, to provide us with the tools, support and inspiration as we adapt to the changing world that we live in.
I'd like to thank the CMA staff who were my new family for the past year, a very dedicated and talented group of people, who always go the extra mile for us. And also the Board and Executive, our CEO Tim Smith, our chair Dr. Brian Brodie and a special thanks to my colleague and friend Dr. Chris Simpson for his leadership and support. He will be greatly missed as he finishes his term as past president.

And to my husband, Greg and my family, thank you for your patience, love and unwavering support.

I thank you, the physicians of Canada, for allowing me the privilege of serving as your president, of representing the profession to which I feel so proud to belong.

I look forward to returning to my family practice in a few weeks and also as serving as your past president in the upcoming year under the capable leadership of my successor, Dr. Granger Avery.

The mission of the CMA is to “help physicians care for patients”. My goal when I set out was to ensure that the work that has been accomplished in the past year supported this mission and thereby directly contributed to the wellbeing of our patients. There’s still much work to do but united in our desire to improve the lives of those we serve, we will succeed.

Thank you.