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Heather Forsyth
Calgary-Fish Creek Constituency

Dr. John Cowell
CEO, Health Quality Council of Alberta
210, 811 - 14 Street NW
Calgary, Alberta
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Dear Dr. Cowell,

Please consider this letter my formal request to meet with you as part of the Health Quality Council of Alberta's ongoing review of – among other things – the role and process of physician advocacy. Specifically, I want to speak with you about Health Minister Fred Horne and answers he gave in the Legislature this week that, in my view, have prejudged the subsequent inquiry the HQCA is going to conduct if and when Bill 24 – the *Health Quality Council of Alberta Act* – is passed.

We have been told this inquiry will further examine instances of physician intimidation as it relates to patient advocacy. In your interim report dated Oct. 27, 2011, you confirmed that you did interview “a number” of physicians who “described life- and career-changing outcomes that they attribute to their advocacy efforts.” The Alberta Medical Association – representative of more than 10,000 physicians in Alberta – has also publicly stated that bullying and intimidation of their members has gone on and is on the record supporting a public inquiry.

On Wednesday, I asked Minister Horne about the upcoming subsequent inquiry that will be conducted if and when Bill 24 is passed. His response to me was very much dismissive, going so far as to say the allegations of physician bullying and intimidation are being made “on the basis of no information, no fact.”

Here is the exchange:

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today is a very sad day. The cancer lab at the Tom Baker cancer centre closes its doors. After more than a decade and after serving more than 10,000 patients using research and testing developed exclusively inhouse, the lab closes despite dire warnings from Dr. Tony Magliocco. He did everything he could to stop it. Not only was he ignored; he was threatened and he was smeared for daring to speak out. My questions are to the Premier. We know that you dismiss this critical issue as a workplace disagreement. Is that how you're going to treat the countless examples of bullying and intimidation of health care professionals?

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much. Well, this issue was discussed in question period previously. The questions were asked and answered. I guess what I'd like to say, Mr. Speaker, is that this recurrent theme of innuendo and rumour with allegations of physician intimidation has become quite tiresome to this government and, in fact, in our opinion, is an insult to the dignity of this House and to the people that work in our health care system.

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, that is unacceptable. He's already got his own Health Quality Council investigating intimidation, and as the minister he has the right to stand up and say that it isn't happening. What are they doing now?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, I'd be very happy to tell you what's unacceptable, in my view. What is unacceptable, in my view, is when I have briefings with my staff, as I did earlier today, and I discover that my staff have been accused of intimidation and collaboration with respect to bullying physicians of this province on the basis of no information, no fact. My staff are simply out there doing their job, conducting a regular billing review, and they are accused of physician intimidation. That is clearly unacceptable.

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, Albertans are not going to accept what he's saying, and the health care professionals in this province are not going to accept what he is saying. Given how Dr. Magliocco was shamefully treated simply for advocating on behalf of his patients and given that he has stated that he would return to Alberta to testify at a judicial inquiry, will you commit immediately to having a judge-led public inquiry as you promised?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, what is unacceptable is what passes for a definition of intimidation in this House by the hon. Members opposite. Disagreement among people in the workplace does not constitute intimidation. Staff of my ministry conducting a regular billing review under the auspices of the Alberta Health Care Insurance Act and being threatened with court action as a result of undertaking their responsibilities under law is not intimidation. What is intimidation is these continual allegations based on rumours, innuendo . . .

This is an absolutely unacceptable response from the Minister who will be responsible for establishing this inquiry. These comments have publicly prejudged the outcome of the inquiry. He has stated unequivocally that the principle objective of the inquiry – that is, investigating the instances of physician intimidation that both you and the AMA have confirmed exist – is essentially meaningless.

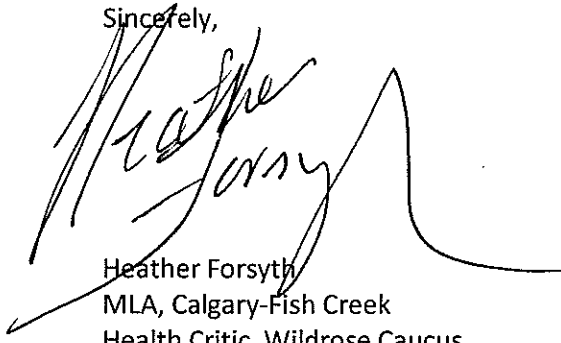
As you know, Minister Horne will be responsible for appointing the HQCA board, which will then select the panelists who will conduct the inquiry. Now that we know Minister Horne obviously doesn't believe there is a problem, there can be no confidence whatsoever that this inquiry will be conducted fairly with an objective at getting at the truth.

Further, physicians who have experienced bullying and intimidation during the course of their jobs will be even less likely to participate in the inquiry and feel even more marginalized, knowing the Minister responsible doesn't believe their concerns are real.

In closing, let me say that I believe Minister Horne's comments have put the HQCA in a very difficult position. Very clearly, he doesn't believe the testimony you are hearing as part of your review – and the evidence that will be given during the subsequent inquiry – have much validity.

Nevertheless, I do look forward to providing you with information that I've compiled through meetings and conversations I've had with several physicians as you do your best to conduct what I feel is now a compromised process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Heather Forsyth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Heather Forsyth
MLA, Calgary-Fish Creek
Health Critic, Wildrose Caucus