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Former AMA president calls health-care referendum a distraction from system crises

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One of the referendum questions asks whether the Government of Alberta should charge a reasonable fee or premium to individuals with nonpermanent immigration status who live in Alberta for their and their families' use of the health-care and education systems.

The opinion of health experts in Alberta, who are also aware of the challenges facing the health-care system in the City of Airdrie, does not favour the proposed question.

According to one of Alberta's most prominent advocates for public health care, Dr. Paul Parks, it is important to consider whether spending thousands of dollars on a non-binding referendum to ask Albertans if a relatively small number of non-permanent residents should pay for access to health care will do anything to address the health care challenges facing the Airdrie community.

"Is that what the government should be prioritizing and spending money and their attention on?" Dr. Parks said, who is an emergency medicine physician based in Medicine Hat, Alberta.

Dr. Parks also served as past President of the Alberta Medical Association (AMA) for the 2023 to 2024 term. As a long-time advocate for bettering public health care, he has devoted considerable time and expertise to raising awareness about the significant access barriers and challenges Albertans face in obtaining timely care.

"If you can get in the system, you get some of the best care in the world hands down, but more and more, we're seeing where Albertans are really having a hard time getting access," Dr. Parks shared. "So many [Albertans] don't have a family physician, but in the acute care world, all roads kind of lead to the emergency department."

In his opinion, the underlying issue is that Alberta's health care system is repeatedly failing patients. As a result, many people in need of care end up in overcrowded emergency departments, where providing safe and timely access to health services for Albertans is becoming increasingly difficult.

When it comes to answering the referendum question, he says there's two major crisis in regards to access to family physicians.

FILE PHOTO/Rocky View Weekly
CONVENIENT SCAPEGOAT? – Amidst ongoing health-care struggles in Airdrie and across the province, experts are warning that a proposed referendum on resident fees may divert necessary attention from life-saving medical improvements.

"We should have a strategy that would work towards bolstering our primary care workforce so that we can get every Albertan access to a family physician," Dr. Parks said.

Concurrently, the other major crisis is access to safe and timely yet acute and hospitalized care, and specifically, this is really sick patients that need to be admitted at a hospital with chest pain, strokes, heart attacks, cancer care, etc. Dr. Parks referred to the case of Prashant Sreekumar, 44, who died in the waiting room of the Grey Nuns Community Hospital in Edmonton, on December 22, 2025.

According to the reports, Sreekumar was a father of three who died from a cardiac arrest while waiting for approximately eight hours for emergency medical care for severe chest pain.

"Actually people are dying in our wait-

ing rooms, and so we must prioritize making sure that we strategize in terms of how to preserve that safe and timely access to emergency and urgent care for Albertans across the province,” Dr. Parks added.

One of the Alberta government’s key priorities has been expanding access to privately delivered, low-acuity health-care services, including procedures performed at surgical facilities and increasing the availability of privately delivered diagnostic testing, he said.

“They seem to have lost complete focus on ensuring that high acuity and time sensitive care is preserved for all the burdens,” Dr. Parks stated.

When an Albertan in need shows up at the emergency department, Dr. Parks says doctors can’t turn them away if the patients are sick or in life threatening conditions.

The referendum question misunderstands the fact that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

“If the government is not going to allow all people living in Alberta to get access to care before they get really sick and critically ill and show up to emergency departments, and we have to literally spend thousands of dollars on them, when they are in that life threatening situation,” Dr. Parks said. “It doesn’t make any sense.”