**From:** Doctors of BC, President
**Sent:** March 20, 2020 2:46 PM
**Subject:** President's Letter: COVID-19 Update

Dear Colleagues,

I continue to be inspired by the many physicians on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response. You are bringing the very best of our profession to the forefront, showing determination and courage in caring for patients, their families, and our communities at this challenging time.

Doctors of BC is here to support you. We continue to work closely with the BC Ministry of Health, the Provincial Health Officer, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC, and other health sector leaders to address and find solutions to the issues you are facing. I also want to thank the staff of Doctors of BC who are working hard to make a difference, so that we as physicians can make ours.

Outlined below are developments that have taken place since my last letter. Additional information can be found on our [COVID-19 website hub](https://www.doctorsofbc.ca/working-change/advocating-physicians/coronavirus-covid-19-updates). If you have questions, e-mail us at covid19@doctorsofbc.ca.

**Billing Changes**

Two new [office visit fee codes](https://www.doctorsofbc.ca/news/covid-19-temporary-billing-changes) were introduced this week for physicians treating patients with suspected or active COVID-19 symptoms, one with test and one without test. These fees are payable for in-office visits with patients displaying suspected or active COVID-19 symptoms.

This is in addition to billing changes enabling physicians to increase use of virtual care (telephone and video), reducing the risk of transmitting the virus. We have received many questions from physicians about the billing changes, and have compiled them with responses into a [Q and A](https://www.doctorsofbc.ca/sites/default/files/faq_telehealth-telephone_services_covid-19.pdf), which you may find helpful. Discussions with the Ministry of Health continue regarding possible changes to the General Practice Services Committee (GPSC) and Specialist Services Committee (SSC) fees.

Following discussions with WorkSafeBC and ICBC, both organizations have agreed that billing rule changes will apply to physicians treating injured workers and those injured in motor vehicle accidents.

**Virtual Care**

With the increased use of virtual care, physicians are asking for support to get started and/or better utilize the technology available to them. A [guide and toolkit](https://www.doctorsofbc.ca/news/doctors-technology-office-virtual-care-support-response)prepared by the Doctors Technology Office are now available. More than 700 physicians took part in the first DTO information webinar this week. Those who were unable to attend can view a [recording of the webinar](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mH4c3zIWT8o&feature=youtu.be). Watch for information on more sessions coming up. The GPSC’s Practice Support Program team is also available to provide in-practice support. For information and direct one-on-one assistance, please call 604-638-5841 or 1-800-665-2262, or e-mail: dtoinfo@doctorsofbc.ca.

**Divisions of Family Practice**

In the last week, we have seen a significant increase in the number of assessment and testing centres, helping to ease pressures on family practices and emergency departments. Divisions are playing key roles in areas such as: working with health authorities to get these centres established in their communities, linking with the community practices to help assess and respond to the needs and challenges, coordination of back-up physicians and locums, and working with practice support resources to help practices identify and provide targeted outreach to their vulnerable patients. Doctors of BC is working to support divisions in this work, working with government to identify and focus resources to meet the needs of communities.

**Medical Staff Associations**

Medical Staff Associations (MSAs) in many sites, working with their health authorities, are playing an important role in coordination of response efforts such as developing protocols and procedures, and identifying how, where, and which physicians can provide care or other supports. They are actively raising concerns to help tackle issues, including shortage of Protective Personal Equipment (PPE), patient transport, and delays in test results. MSAs are also embracing the importance of clear communications, working with health authorities to ensure physicians get timely information and answers to their questions.

**Income Loss**

As health authorities cancel surgeries and reallocate resources, some physicians may see significant income loss. Doctors of BC understands the importance of this issue for those impacted who in many cases continue to fund their overhead costs, including employees’ salaries. Government is aware of this challenge across the health care sector and in the economy as a whole. We appreciate your patience with regard to such compensation, as government is currently focused on the emergency before us. We will continue engaging with government on this matter.

**Suspension of the Driver Medical Examination Reports**

RoadSafetyBC is temporarily suspending the issuance of Driver Medical Examination Reports (DMER), along with any outstanding DMERs and other medical requirements, in response to the pressure on the medical community during the COVID-19 pandemic. RoadSafetyBC will not be seeking additional medical information from physicians at this time. Physicians are still asked to report the highest-risk medically compromised drivers to RoadSafetyBC through Section 230 of the Motor Vehicle Act, and are asked to do so with as much information as possible to enable swift action by the Superintendent. Doctors of BC advocated for this change to reduce burdens on physicians. We thank RoadSafetyBC and ICBC for their quick action.

For physicians needing to contact RoadSafetyBC during this time, please use the physician only telephone line: 1-250-953-8612.

**Sick Notes**

Members have advised us of additional pressures due to employers requesting sick notes. A [news story](https://www.doctorsofbc.ca/news/bc-doctors-urge-employers-stop-asking-sick-notes) posted on the Doctors of BC website has already attracted significant attention. The Provincial Health Officer reiterated at a media briefing this week that, “All employers must waive the requirement for employees to produce a sick note. Please don’t go to the doctor to get a sick note.” We will continue to get this message out to employers and the public.

**Insurance and Benefits**

The Insurance team at Doctors of BC continue to serve physicians, responding to questions and requests on benefits and coverage. You can e-mail them at insurance@doctorsofbc.ca with questions about coverage and Quarantine Income Replacement benefits. A number of physicians are asking about applying for insurance at this time. The Insurance team advises that applications for insurance usually take two months or more for the insurance companies to finalize, and are expected to take even longer during this pandemic period due to high demand. The team will do their best to support you to enroll in coverage as soon as possible, given the current limitations.

**Shortage of Supplies**

We are hearing from many physicians who are facing a shortage of Protective Personal Equipment. Some offices have run out of supplies altogether. This is a problem being faced everywhere in our country, and around the world. In response, the Prime Minister has announced plans to mobilize industries to rapidly produce the equipment needed in our own country. Funding will be made available to adapt existing manufacturing processes. Companies already producing masks, hand sanitizers, and other protective equipment will be able to scale up production. Solutions to this problem need to come from this level of government working with industry, and I am pleased to see them taking action.

**Timing of Test Results**

The Provincial Health Officer this week acknowledged the challenge of providing timely test results, as the system is under pressure. The government has now set up five central labs in BC to analyze tests. We are hopeful that this will begin to allay the concerns we are hearing about the length of time to get results.

More focused testing may also help to reduce response times. This week the BCCDC released [updated guidelines](http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/clinical-resources/covid-19-care/clinical-care/primary-care) on when patient testing should be done, which now includes [symptomatic women](http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Professionals-Site/Documents/Pregnancy-COVID19-Community-Providers.pdf) who are pregnant, and when [health care workers](http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Professionals-Site/Documents/Testing%20health%20care%20workers%20for%20COVID19.pdf) should be tested. Physicians can also use and encourage their patients to use government’s [self-assessment tool](https://covid19.thrive.health/).

**Physician Safety and Wellness**

The physical protection of physicians and support staff is of critical importance to Doctors of BC. In addition to supporting implementation of virtual care, the many measures referenced above are designed to enhance your safety.

Beyond physical safety, we recognize that this is a very stressful time for all. The [Physician Health Program](https://www.physicianhealth.com/) has put in place additional resources and staffing (including clinical counsellors and physicians) to support you. It is important that we look out for each other, that we take time for friends and family (virtual as needed), and that we realize that we are all trying our best to respond in these challenging times. It has never been more important that we look out for each other, that we are collegial and respectful, and that we optimize everyone’s skills so that everyone can do their part to help in this crisis.

We are in this together. Together, we are and will continue to make a real difference in the lives of millions of British Columbians. Take care, and stay safe.

Sincerely,

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