

Agreement on Internal Trade

The Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT) was signed in 1994 by federal, provincial and territorial governments with the intent to remove barriers to the movement of workers, goods, services and capital.

Chapter 7 of the agreement, signed on December 5, 2008, outlines the commitment to achieve full labour mobility in Canada for regulated trades and professions. Canada's Premiers set **April 1, 2009** as the date for the labour mobility provisions to take effect.

Physicians in Canada with full Canadian qualifications (MD, LMCC and certification with either the College of Family Physicians of Canada or the Royal College of Physicians & Surgeons of Canada) have always been free to move throughout the country, with rare exceptions (due primarily to disciplinary findings). The updated AIT, however, grants this freedom to physicians without full qualifications.

I have written previously about our unease with this amended agreement, and the expansion of free mobility to physicians who do not have full qualifications. Our primary concern is that many Canadian jurisdictions will now have to lower their registration standards to the 'lowest common denominator'. This puts the public at risk. For example, some jurisdictions do not require a minimum of 24 months of accredited postgraduate training. Other jurisdictions do not require that an applicant have passed any of the Medical Council of Canada examinations (including the evaluating exam) prior to initial registration.

Our main role as a regulator is to ensure that qualified physicians provide competent care to Albertans. My goal is to ensure that every qualified applicant for registration to practise medicine in Alberta gets a license, and to ensure that only qualified applicants get a license. To lower our standards beyond what we

currently require would be an abrogation of our responsibility to protect the public. Provincial and territorial medical regulators met on March 16, 2009 to see if we could agree on minimally acceptable registration standards for new registrants in Canada. Unfortunately, we failed. Some regulators worry that raising their standards will hamper the recruitment of internationally trained physicians to their jurisdiction and aggravate the very real shortage of physicians they face. Other regulators – including the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta - worry that lowering the registration standards will expose patients to physicians who may not provide the quality of medical care Canadians expect.

The Agreement on Internal Trade means that all physicians, even those with lesser qualifications, will be able to move from the jurisdiction that initially registered them to any other province, at any time. Our collective failure to agree on mutually acceptable minimum criteria for registration means that the standard for registration has become 'a race to the bottom' in this country.

To be explicit, some jurisdictions may license a physician who has one year of postgraduate training in a jurisdiction with which we are not familiar, and who has passed none of the MCC exams. Once that physician has a licence in one province, s/he can move to Alberta to practise, and we may not impose "any material additional training, experience, examinations or assessments" (wording from Article 706 from chapter 7 of the Labour Mobility agreement).

Under AIT, we cannot require that the physician pass the MCC Evaluating Exam (or any other exam) and we will not be able to require an assessment of the applicant's knowledge or skills. We believe this severely hampers our ability to ensure Albertans receive safe, competent care from the physicians we register.

AIT does not equate to national licensure.

Physicians who wish to practise medicine in Alberta must still go through the CPSA registration application process, and pay applicable fees.

It is important to point out that the labour mobility provisions in the AIT do not equate to national licensure. Physicians will still need to go through the appropriate registration process for each jurisdiction they wish to practise in. Physicians will also be required to pay the applicable College's registration fees.

For Alberta, our process remains the same. Applicants must first complete an online eligibility assessment. If successful, the individual must complete the full application, provide the necessary information, meet our requirements (e.g. credential verification) and pay our fees.

It seems completely apt that the amendments to AIT take effect on April Fool's Day. Unfortunately, lowering the licensing standards for physicians means patient care will ultimately suffer. And that's no joke!

Dr. Trevor Theman, Registrar
ttheman@cpsa.ab.ca