

## **Doctors, druggists in war of words: Prescription reform debated**

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Alberta druggists and physicians are feuding over regulatory changes that will allow pharmacists in this province to prescribe some medications for the first time in Canada.

In an escalating war of words between several professional groups, the Alberta Pharmacists' Association released a statement Monday saying it's "gravely concerned" about two medical groups calling "into question the professionalism of Alberta pharmacists."

The statement comes after the Alberta Medical Association and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta raised concerns about the

proposed new role for pharmacists, with some doctors questioning whether druggists are qualified to diagnose medical problems.

Medical association members have also questioned whether the power to prescribe puts pharmacists in a conflict of interest because they make their living selling drugs.

"We take some of the language from some physicians as demeaning the profession of pharmacists and we think that's somewhat unprecedented," said Barry Cavanaugh of the Alberta Pharmacists' Association.

But the AMA and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta said they are only concerned with patient safety.

"We do not, in any way shape or form, want to question their professionalism," said Dr. Tzu-Kuang Lee, president of the AMA.

"These are the same questions we would ask ourselves if we were in their position."

At the centre of the verbal dustup is an announcement last month that the Alberta government will allow the province's 3,500 pharmacists to prescribe some drugs for minor ailments.

Major medical conditions are still expected to be referred to a physician.

The new regulations, expected to become law this fall, will also allow pharmacists to extend and modify existing prescriptions.

Doctors' groups have long expressed concern about the proposal, which has been about a decade in the making.

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta has said that pharmacists' groups haven't provided evidence their members have the training or expertise to safely prescribe drugs.

College officials said other professions seeking endorsement to prescribe drugs have presented their case, including information on training programs, before physicians gave their blessing.

"The pharmacists did not provide that information," said college spokeswoman Kelly Eby. "Maybe that will happen in the coming months."

Meanwhile, the AMA said some of its members have expressed concern that pharmacists may not be qualified to diagnose illnesses.

Other doctors have raised conflict-of-interest concerns, noting physicians aren't permitted to both prescribe and dispense drugs.

But the Alberta Pharmacists' Association said the concerns show an ignorance of the proposed regulations.

The association said its members are drug therapy experts, not physicians, and won't be diagnosing medical conditions.

Officials added they're unhappy with implications that pharmacists would be in a conflict of interest, saying their members hold themselves to standards that forbid prescribing for a profit.

"Physicians need to wait and see what the regulations permit so they can see what the scope of practice looks like in the fall," Cavanaugh said.

Officials are still determining what drugs pharmacists should be able to prescribe and what training will be required.

Alberta Health has said pharmacists will prescribe drugs only for conditions set out by the Alberta College of Pharmacists.

Both the AMA and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta said Monday they're encouraged by the work to establish prescribing requirements for pharmacists.

"They are being very cautious with this," said Eby. "That's a good thing."