

Georgetown doctor not impressed by Bob Rae's OMA tweet

By Graeme Frisque

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Former Ontario Premier Bob Rae caused quite a stir with a tweet posted last week calling into question the Ontario Medical Association's motives in negotiations with the province.

"On @metromorning doctor kept saying 'we're fighting for better health care,'" tweeted Rae. "OMA is a union fighting for higher incomes for docs. Period."

Rae, who no longer serves in government as an elected official, posted the above tweet Tuesday following an appearance by Georgetown doctor Nadia Alam on CBC's Metro Morning, where she spoke of some of the changes she believes need to be made at OMA as they relate to patient care.

Her appearance followed the resignation of the OMA's entire six-member executive committee.

The OMA and province have been engaged in contract talk for years now, and according to Alam, the province's doctors have been working without a contract for three years.

Dr. Alam, who was recently elected to the OMA board of directors and will officially assume her new role in May, pulled few

punches in her response to Mr. Rae's tweet.

"This isn't just about money, this is about the bigger picture of the health-care system, and how the government is doing stuff and putting through bad policies because it's ignoring the voices of patients, caregivers and front-line workers," she said.

"I find it very frustrating, honestly. You can see by the responses to (Rae's) comments and the fact that doctors are still talking about it and tweeting about it today that flippant comments like this — careless comments like this about the health-care system — it frustrates us because this is exactly what's wrong with politicians and their approach to health care."

"They don't see the suffering, they don't take it seriously. They don't have to look patients in the eye and say to them, 'I'm sorry, you're going to have to wait two years, wait four years, five years for that surgery. I'm sorry your surgery got cancelled again because the hospital ran out of beds. I'm sorry you can't see the specialist because they've had to close their offices due to cuts to health care,'" added Alam.

Alam didn't dodge the question when asked about the money component of the negotiations, pointing out that doctors have businesses to run with overhead costs and staff to pay.

"We've had cuts to the physicians' service budget as a whole and to individual physicians' salaries for the past five years. It's beginning to catch up because over those five years, inflation has gone up, salaries for our staff has gone up, equipment costs have gone up, computers are more expensive — everything is more expensive," she said.

"In my mind, my salary is kind of at the bottom of my list of priorities. What I want this government to do is grow up and start taking health care seriously. I want them to not just fund health care around the time of elections. I want them to take a smart approach to managing health care."

Alam, an anesthesiologist and family doctor with a practice in Georgetown, says the real issue for Ontario doctors goes far beyond their salaries and is focused more on patient care and the current state of the health-care system.

"When you try to create a health-care system without talking to front-line workers, it's kind of like trying to make a kitchen without talking to the cook. It's simply not going to work and will be a waste of billions of dollars — money that could actually go to helping people right now."

"I want this government to open its eyes and start making the right decisions. It needs to start talking to the front-line work-

ers to figure out what the best way forward is for a sustainable health-care system, because the way they're doing it right now it's a mess — it honestly is," she said.

She pointed to patient wait times, inadequate funding and short-sighted legislation as the real reasons for the impasse in negotiations with the province.

"Honestly, if the government turned around and said, 'Oh my God, Dr. Alam, we love our doctors and we're going to give you guys this fantastic contract, it would not fix the problem of the health-care system. So it's not good enough for us. We need to fix the broader health care systems so that it becomes rewarding to be a doctor again, and (doctors) feel proud to be doctors again. And right now, that's not happening,'" said Alam.

When asked about the current state of said negotiations, Alam pointed the finger directly at the provincial government.

"I think we're actually further apart than we were. A lot of doctors are realizing this government just doesn't want to play ball. And Bob Rae's tweet just kind of confirms that. It's so typical of this government," she said.

Once again, despite a long political career, it is important to note Rae was speaking as a private citizen and not a member of the provincial government.

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