Undaunted, Swanson joined the Liberal Party, won the nomination in the premier’s riding and campaigned against both Klein and the Tories. He ended up losing the surprisingly close contest by 3000 votes. His motivation to get involved in politics, which probably holds a message for politicians contemplating the upcoming federal election, arose from his personal experiences with spending cuts.

“The doctors I’ve talked to are very concerned about what’s happening,” he said. “They are demoralized. The province turned hospital boards into regional health authorities, excluded doctors from the process, and they had no plan — so they are unable to turn around and see where they went wrong.”

Swanson fears that with the creation of 17 regional health authorities, similar to the US-style health maintenance organizations (HMOs), Alberta is moving toward a two-tiered system.

He pointed out that Klein’s $475-million reinvestment program is drawn out over 3 years and won’t return the province to 1992 spending levels on health by the turn of the century. “It will still be a continual decline in health care services.”

Dr. Robert Burns, executive director of the Alberta Medical Association (AMA), hears the voices of frustrated doctors every day. And he shares the same feelings of alienation as many of his colleagues. “The entire health care professional community, the provider community, is still in a hell of a state in Alberta,” Burns said during the provincial election campaign. “When you are taking almost half the nursing jobs out and there is an incredible loss in medical lab technicians and a total of 140-odd fewer doctors in the province from 2 years ago — often from key areas — those are some of the outward signs of inward resentment and doctors and not being given their due.” (Prior to the election, the government removed a cap on physicians’ fees. It also reached a contract settlement with the province’s nurses, averting a potential strike.)

Swanson remains concerned about what the future holds. “This is [like] medicine practised in HMOs,” he said. During the Alberta campaign, AMA president Dr. Kabir Jivraj said doctors in the province are getting mixed signals about the reinvestment in health care, and remain uneasy. On one hand, they heard RHAs and the province admitting that mistakes had been made restructuring health care, but on the other hand they felt unable to trust anyone.

Once the election was over, said Jivraj, the government had to show a commitment to improving health care. “Physicians are waiting to see what happens with RHAs and the government,” he said. “We as physicians don’t want a repeat of the past 4 years.”

Physicians vocal during Alberta campaign

Doctors in an Alberta health care region made the campaign trail difficult for Premier Ralph Klein during the recent provincial election. For 3 days physicians in the Mistahia Health Region, afraid that a new mandate for the Klein government would mean hospital closures in remote rural towns, stopped admitting patients for anything but emergency cases. They wanted to show residents what health care services might be like if the region did not receive extra funding. Klein called the move by doctors a “war on the sick.”

But doctors in the region were simply putting health care front and centre as the month-long campaign wound down. And because the authority’s board had been considering closing at least 1 of 3 small rural hospitals within its boundaries, doctors wanted patients to know what impact a closure might have.

The region has 4 hospitals — 3 small facilities and a large hospital in the oil and logging town of Grande Prairie. When word went out that the authority was considering downgrading the 3 smaller hospitals, public meetings in the towns convinced the regional board that residents didn’t want to see their hospitals’ roles reduced.