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Hon. Theresa Oswald (Minister of Health): Mr. Acting Chair, as per discussion with my critic, we have agreed that we will both make some opening remarks today. So I will begin.

Mr. Acting Chair, certainly it is an honour to be sitting in this chair today as Manitoba's Minister of Health. I think anyone that has that sort of responsibility bestowed upon them would certainly feel that honour and feel the weight of that responsibility as well. I am very committed to working with our government, with the citizens of Manitoba to do all that we can to ensure that people are getting the care that they need when they need it.

I know that consistently health care has been the No. 1 priority of our government, and we know that it is the No. 1 priority on the minds of Manitobans. We all have, at one time or another, experiences with our health-care system, and we all have our stories to tell. We have our challenges to cite and our successes to celebrate. We know that people care deeply about what kind of care their parents get, their children get, their brothers and sisters get, their neighbours get, and that's why we're working every day to ensure that we can work with the people in the health-care community to make that care second to none.

We have, of course, recently come through an election campaign where our government has made very clear the commitments and the direction that we have on the subject of health care. It isn't on its face complicated, Mr. Acting Chair, but it is clear.

Our commitments have been over time and will continue to be to increase the number of health-care professionals that exist in our system to be able to provide that care. We have made specific commitments about increasing the number of doctors in our system. We've made specific commitments about increasing the number of nurses that will exist in our system. We've talked about how we will achieve that, and that is undoubtedly going to be part of our more fulsome discussion as we go forward, but those issues, of course, consist of remuneration, they consist of looking at the quality of life that our health-care professionals must lead. It considers issues of innovation within the system that draw professionals to come to Manitoba and retain the very fine people that we have. Of course, it addresses continued investment, not only of a capital nature infrastructure, but of technology, of IT, and so forth.

Our commitments were clear on increasing additional health-care staff, whether it's health-care aides or technologists or primary care, other kinds of professionals that exist in our system to help Manitobans be as healthy as they can be.

We've been clear on our continued commitment to reduce wait times, and we've been very clear on our commitment to continue to bring care closer to Manitobans so that they can live and work through sometimes very difficult times with family members who are ill in their communities with their families.

We've also been clear about our overarching commitment to ensure that care is provided to people based on their medical need, Mr. Acting Chair, and not on the size of their wallet. We know that there are many ways that one can enter that debate which, indeed, has been a lively one in recent weeks across the country and across the world, really. But we know that one of the ways that we can engage in that debate is by participating in making a health-care system better, and stronger, so that people don't have to entertain the idea of going into other systems because they're concerned about how long they have to wait. We have had very good success in some areas, and we have more work to do in others, and we've never shied away from that.

I would also say that it's a privilege to sit in this chair but, indeed, it is challenging, and I have never said otherwise. Dealing with challenging issues like reducing disparities that exist in our population when it comes to health status, whether we're talking about disparities among Aboriginal people, among our immigrant populations, those living in poverty, single women, we know that there are people, as groups, in our society that are less healthy than others, and we need to work diligently to ensure that we reduce that disparity.

And we know that we can't do this alone, Mr. Acting Chair. We cannot, as a Department of Health, address some of these broad issues. We know it has to be a shared vision and a shared responsibility. And when we talk about determinants of health, education, poverty, housing, it has to be a collaborative approach if we're going to ever make a meaningful and profound difference in the lives of Manitobans who exist with these great disparities in their health status. And we know that we can't do it alone on a provincial level. We have to work with our municipal counterparts, and we must work in partnership with the federal government as we go forward on these very important issues.

Lastly, and without it being least, our government's commitment to prevention and promotion of health and healthy living has been very clear. While, certainly, the Minister of Healthy Living (Ms. Irvin-Ross) is going to be talking about that in her Estimates, it must be said that that particular piece of a very complex puzzle is arguably the most important one. How can we make society look at the issue of health, not from a sickness-care perspective, but from the promotion-of-health perspective? It's a very big job, and it's something that we have to do together.

So, in closing, Mr. Acting Chair, I would say that it is indeed an honour to have this responsibility. It is an incredible one, and, as somebody that has had very direct experiences recently with our health-care system, you know, over the last two years, as somebody having a child in Manitoba, you have an up close and personal look at the health-care system, and the gratitude that you feel towards those nurses and those doctors in those very intense moments cannot be put into words. I know the member opposite may likely share similar feelings about how grateful you are to those people that help you through arguably the most important moment of your life.

I would also say that, recently, I had to go through the loss of a parent. Arguably, there's no more difficult time in one's life to lose one's mother, and to have the doctors and the nurses at your side with incredible medical expertise and absolute intuition about what your needs are in those most difficult moments. Well, it's an honour to be part of that system and to work to make it better.

Thank you, Mr. Acting Chair.