



A conversation with Allan Seckel, CEO of the BCMA

Mr Allan Seckel began his law career at Russell & DuMoulin and became partner/associate of the merged firm of Fasken Martineau DuMoulin. Mr Seckel holds a bachelor of laws from the University of Victoria, a master of laws from Cambridge University, and commerce and economics degrees from Simon Fraser University.

Mr Seckel became BC's deputy attorney general in 2003, overseeing the administration of justice in the province, including providing court services to support the independent judiciary, justice services to the public, legal services to government, and prosecution services under the Criminal Code and provincial statutes.

In 2009 he was appointed deputy minister to the premier and cabinet secretary. In this position he was also the head of the BC Public Service, where he was responsible for the overall leadership and administration of the Government of British Columbia, including advising the premier on all policy issues facing the cabinet.

Mr Seckel brought his experience as an advocate, strategist, and policy advisor to the BCMA in November 2011. *BCMJ* managing editor Jay Draper spoke to him in December.

JD: I see that when you were studying economics and commerce at SFU you played basketball, and you've since coached. Do you still play or coach?

AS: Basketball was an important part of my life, particularly when I was younger, and I played through the first part of my university years and then in men's leagues until I was in my early 40s. I coached my son and then my two daughters in community sports and I played until 2008 when I ruptured my left Achilles tendon, and it's never recovered sufficiently to allow me to continue playing. I coached until my kids lost interest in sports and gained interest in the arts.

And now...

And now I drive my kids to their various arts-related activities. I have three children: a son who's 19 and a student at UBC, a daughter who's 16 and in high school in Vancouver, and another daughter who's 12 and in grade 7. My daughters are heavily into singing and dancing, so that's where I spend my time, taking them to where they need to be.

You've written two law books, and I was wondering if you have any other books in mind for the future?

One law book is an annual publication so I get to update it every year. In terms of another book, I actually have a kids' novel that I have outlined in my brain, and I've done a little bit of work on it,

but with the growing age of my children, there seems to be less impetus to finish it. Perhaps when I'm completely retired.

You practised law for 18 years before becoming BC's deputy attorney general. What made you interested in switching from private practice into public service?

A combination of factors. I'd been practising law for about 18 years, and there were still lots of challenges, of course. I think any professional practice has ongoing challenges to it. But I'd done that long enough to appreciate what the challenges were. I was interested in the idea of doing something in the public policy area, and the opportunity to try to make a difference was very intriguing. The idea was that I would do it for 3 years and go back to practising law in a private firm, but life didn't turn out that way.

What attracted you to the role of CEO of the BCMA?

In my years in government, I grew to really enjoy the mix of strategic elements, public policy, and administrative aspects. That mix of functions is quite enjoyable and quite challenging, but there aren't very many places where you can actually do them all. But the BCMA is a place where you do have that ability—think of all of the policy issues the BCMA is working on. Certainly administering a first-

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class organization like the BCMA is exciting. And it's a place where you can feel at the end of the day that you're making a difference in a way that's perhaps a little more unique than places that are mostly about earning profit. It's that mixture that attracted me to the BCMA.

There's no CEO school that I've ever heard of. How do you prepare to become the CEO of an organization?

That's a good question. People might also ask, "How did a lawyer end up being the CEO of the BCMA?" It's a gradual process. I studied economics and commerce in university, learned a lot about organizations, and spent a fair amount of time in that context on courses, and doing a thesis on organizational theory. So I've always had that interest. And in the time that I was in the law firm, I was involved in the administration of the law firm as the deputy managing partner. We had a chief operating officer who had been a general manager of what eventually became TELUS Mobility, so I learned a lot from him in terms of how to be an administrator and how to manage professionally. When you think about it, really the deputy minister's job is a CEO job—you're essentially the CEO of a ministry. As well, in the premier's office, that's very much got CEO functions to it insofar as you're worried about some of the common elements that span the entire public service. So I feel like I've had 8 years of experience of being a CEO. I think that it's just a combination of experience through those roles that makes me feel that I'm ready for the challenges ahead.

When you were working in government, you must have had an opinion of the BCMA. What does the BCMA look like from Victoria?

You certainly get the sense of the BCMA being a powerful organiza-

tion. I think government appreciates that when it comes to a one-on-one dispute between government and the BCMA, you can't underestimate the ability of the BCMA to come out on top. The degree to which the BCMA is involved in policy issues is understood and seen. But I think there's an opportunity to make the BCMA more influential in policy. I perceive a tendency at the political level to perhaps forget about the BCMA except for in those circumstances where it is a direct one-on-one issue or conflict. And yet now that I'm here, I see so many things that the BCMA has done and can rightfully take credit for that perhaps it didn't get credit for inside of government, or at least not the kind of credit that it would've hoped to have achieved.

So you might be able to see some new ways to influence government.

Yes, I hope so. There's a tendency to read a political statement into many things that government does, when really, it's just government struggling at an administrative level to achieve something, and there's really no politics behind it all. So the relationships you have with senior public servants are more important than sometimes people can appreciate—and are less politically laden than people sometimes imagine. So often, there is no political message coming through; it's just administrators in Victoria trying to do the best they can with the resources they have, perhaps stepping on something that they didn't intend to step on. So this is an area where I think I can help—recognizing when Victoria's actions are political and when they're administrative, and then trying to go to the right place, depending on the answer.

What are the pros and cons of having a non-physician as a leader of the BCMA?

There are a lot of doctors on the Board. In fact, last I checked, they're all doc-

tors. So it's good, I think, to have another perspective to bear on issues. Another perspective is valuable in terms of providing a complementary way of seeing things and of thinking about things that, together, can combine to be something better than it would be otherwise. Of course most of the staff of the BCMA aren't physicians, so that perspective has always been there, but perhaps it would just be a little bit stronger and a little bit louder, and as a result, just a little bit better. I saw during the hiring process that there was a real desire to try to not worry about the professional background of whoever was hired, but to try to get the best person for the job. Hopefully I can fulfill those expectations.

What experience in your past is most useful to you in your role as CEO?

I think in some respects it's the time I spent as the deputy managing partner of a law firm, and it's more about the mistakes I made at that time than the accomplishments. Trying to manage lawyers is often compared to trying to herd cats, and perhaps the same is true of physicians. People are attracted to professions to a certain degree because they create the autonomy that comes with professionals' roles. And they are very busy trying to either serve clients or serve patients. In that sense, I think lawyers and doctors are similar. What I learned the hard way was the degree to which you need to involve and consult with lawyers—and I now think doctors—to make sure that you don't just think you know the answer and you're not just trying to impose it; but to gather input, to really communicate. That means you need to listen, not talk. I certainly learned a lot of more specific administrative issues during the time in government. And I think my understanding of the current political and public service dynamics is also of great value here.

You've been CEO for about 2 months now. Any surprises?

I have some really positive impressions. I've spent most of the time in the first month meeting all the staff, trying to meet them in small groups or one-on-one, and it's been really refreshing to meet so many people who are really dedicated to their jobs and to their role of serving physicians in BC. It's got a great culture and atmosphere here in terms of how people interact with each other. I think that's the dominant impression that I have at the beginning.

Can you tell me about your decision-making style?

I think that I'm analytical, and as a result, I tend to gather evidence. I'm not someone who needs to have every last bit of evidence before I can make a decision—I need to have most of it. But I do have a thirst for information.

What's your leadership style?

I've always thought that leadership is an important thing for everyone in an organization to think about because there's leadership everywhere through the organization. Everyone has to lead themselves, if not other people. What you really need to do is ensure that they understand what the goals are, what the constraints are on any decisions they can make, and what's expected of them, and then you need to give them the autonomy to make decisions. I really do believe that leadership is mostly about inspiring people to do the right thing. People need to be able to chart their own course, not be micromanaged, because most of the time, when people are faced with an issue, you can't have them running upstairs or downstairs or across the hall to ask a question. You have to rely on their judgment. So you make sure that their judgment is all pointing in the same direction. And that's really, I think, the ultimate goal of a good leader.

Do you have a set of goals or priorities that you'd like to accomplish over the next few years?

I've tried to really focus in the first 90 days on listening and learning and trying to see what I think some of the challenges are for the organization: where we can take good and maybe turn it into great. Once I've formulated those observations, I'll report to the Board as to what they are. Ultimately, I can't just decide that I'm going to have a bunch of goals. It's up to the Board to determine what the goals of the Association are, then for me to try to get the organization to implement those goals. I always have personal goals that are mostly about trying to achieve excellence in terms of being helpful to people and trying to help others fulfill their goals. I think that's a big part of being a leader in an organization—trying to help other people to achieve their own goals. But other than that, it's still a little bit early for me to be specific or concrete about goals.

Any final thoughts?

Members who aren't involved in the BCMA may wonder what goes on here, and they can be assured that this place is full of very hardworking individuals, all toiling on behalf of physicians and health care in British Columbia. There are some very innovative things emanating from this organization—the GPSC, the Shared Care Committee, and the Specialist Services Committees all come to mind. I think those innovations are really important and we perhaps could do a little bit better job of letting the public know about them. But I think people should be very comfortable knowing how hard people work to make BC a better place for both patients and physicians.

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