

EYE SURGERY AT PUBLIC HOSPITALS

864. Dr M.D. NAHAN to the Minister for Health:

A report in *The West Australian* last Friday stated —

Thousand of patients needing sight-saving eye surgery face a fresh blow with the State Government poised to slash the fees it pays doctors for cataract removals at some public hospitals.

Can the minister advise the house whether this report is true?

Dr K.D. HAMES replied:

I was somewhat surprised to read this article in *The West Australian*. I am pleased to say that it came from Andrew Tillett, a Canberra reporter, and not from one of our local reporters, who I am sure would not have put an article like this in a paper, given that, firstly, it is totally untrue for a start and that, secondly, nobody even asked us whether it was correct. The story states that thousands of patients needing eye surgery face a fresh blow with the state government poised to slash the fees it pays for cataract removals in some public hospitals. That is absolutely and totally untrue. We are not slashing or even cutting the fees that we pay for cataract surgery in public hospitals. As this house will be aware, the federal government is slashing the Medicare fee for cataract surgery by almost half. I totally oppose that move. I am pleased to say that not only do I oppose it, but the federal opposition and the minor parties have opposed the measure and blocked it in the Senate. The federal Minister for Health is going back with another fee that is slightly higher, but is still a significant reduction, and my view is that that should be opposed as well.

If the eye specialists continue to charge their current fees for cataract surgery, many of the patients having surgery in the private sector will have to pay huge amounts out of their own pockets—in the order of \$300—for that sight-saving surgery. Unfortunately, this will put huge pressure on the state system, where we maintain the same level of fees, when people come into the public system and do not have to pay at all. There will be an enormous movement of patients from the private sector to the public sector. Currently, more than half the cataract surgery in Western Australia is done privately. We all know that Western Australians value enormously their private insurance. More than half of Western Australians have private insurance, and that saves a huge amount of cost to the taxpayers and the government. It is very interesting to see that the commonwealth looks as though it will persist with the cut, which will in essence move a significant cost from the commonwealth government to the state government.

The article goes on to say that the fees are linked to the Medicare fee, and that will also be halved from 1 December. There is an association between those fees—they are similar—but they are in no way linked. I say again that there will be no change to the fees for cataract surgery in public hospitals in Western Australia.