MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES, BUNBURY

Grievance

MR G.M. CASTRILLI (Bunbury) [9.10 am]: My grievance is directed to the Minister for Health on behalf of the people of Bunbury and the south west. Mental health services in Bunbury have deteriorated over the past three years, and have reached a crisis point in the past 12 months. Labor has promised to spend $11 million fixing the health system in Bunbury, but what is its position on mental health? Dr Sev Ozdowski, a human rights commissioner who has travelled around Australia conducting mental health forums with workers, clients and carers, says that Bunbury stands out as the worst in Australia because of inadequate care and human rights breaches. Dr Ozdowski has decided to launch his report on the state of mental health services in regional Australia in Bunbury towards the end of June, because Bunbury has the worst services in regional Australia.

Hon Keith Wilson, Chairman of the Mental Health Council and President of the Western Australian Association for Mental Health, says that the state of mental health services in Bunbury is a scandal. The council and the association are supposed to oversee the implementation of new funding initiatives, but in the south west alone they cannot get any access to information within the mental health system.

Bunbury needs a fully operational mental health clinic, as was promised by the Gallop government. We have waited more than a year for the reopening of the mental health outpatients clinic, which was closed during 2004 and was supposed to reopen in November 2004. It was not opened then because it was too close to Christmas, according to Mary Vukovich, secretary of the Bunbury Mental Health Consumer/Carer Reference Group. What do people with mental health problems do? Do they put their illnesses on hold over the Christmas period? When the outpatients clinic does eventually reopen it will not be adequate, because many services that should be offered will not be available, and those that are offered will be difficult to access. People suffering from mental health problems will not be able to walk in to access help; they will have to make an appointment with the Perth-based telephone service, South West 24. There have been many reports that the service is difficult to access, with people having to ring many times before getting service. That is not really good for people who are suffering from serious mental health problems. The treatment pathway is not always straightforward; it is too complicated and prolonged. The other problem with the new mental health clinic is that it does not have an outside “cool off” area for patients who need to take a bit of time to cool down and work through their problems. This was identified as a priority by the consumer/carer reference group but no action was taken.

The living skills rehabilitation program, which was discontinued in December 2003, must be re-established. It provided essential rehabilitation services for patients once they left the acute care psychiatric facility at the health campus. When will Bunbury residents again have access to living skills?

More psychiatrists and mental health specialists are needed. There is at present one psychiatrist for inpatients and a locum for outpatients. Under World Health Organisation factoring, Bunbury should have at least nine psychiatrists. Where are the other eight? When will this lack of support be addressed? We have lost four psychiatrists in the past 12 months because the structural support for them does not exist. Mental health professionals have been brought to Bunbury and the south west lifestyle is very appealing to them, but then they start to ask some basic questions, such as where the mental health clinic is, and they are told that there is not one. Where are the clinicians? There are none. Where are the occupational therapists for rehabilitation? It is the same story - there are none. What is being done to attract mental health professionals to Bunbury and to help them stay there by providing adequate structures and support services in the mental health system? There are no rooms for clinicians in the new clinic, so where will they go? A sad example of the failure of the system to keep mental health professionals was the clinical mental health nurse specialist who came to Bunbury to head up the inpatients unit and resigned after only two days in the job because no mental health structures were in place.

There is a need for new beds and cluster homes, as promised by the Gallop government. Bunbury has been promised 18 new beds in acute services and 15 cluster homes for people to live in community-supported accommodation. When will these promised facilities eventuate? A secure future for the clozapine clinic is also necessary. This clinic is attached to the acute psychiatric unit at the Bunbury Regional Hospital. A patient receiving clozapine must enter hospital to have the drug, and then must be weaned off old medication, which can take up to 12 months. Dr Main left on 3 March 2005, so the clozapine clinic does not have a full-time public psychiatrist. It is required to have a psychiatrist to operate. How is the clozapine clinic operating without a full-time psychiatrist? What guarantee do we have that the clinic will continue to function? What plans are being put in place to save people the trouble of having to travel to Mandurah or Perth for clozapine?

I am sure that the minister is aware that this is a very serious problem for the Bunbury community and the south west, and I urge him to give it his full and urgent attention.

MR J.A. McGINTY (Fremantle - Minister for Health) [9.16 am]: I thank the member for Bunbury for raising this very important issue. I have not been at all happy with the standard of mental health care offered in Bunbury and the south west, or the facilities through which mental health services operate. I will take some time...
in responding to the grievance raised by the member for Bunbury to deal with what the government intends to do about reversing that unhappy situation. During the election the government made a commitment to significantly boost mental health services and facilities in Bunbury and the south west region. The mental health initiatives we have announced will significantly turn around the current lack of services in mental health in Bunbury. The additional money will ensure that mental health patients and their families in the south west receive the treatment they need.

The government has announced a $9.68 million capital commitment to mental health in the south west. In addition to that, a commitment of $4.21 million has been made to operational costs over the life of the mental health strategy announcements. This money will be used in part to provide another 18 beds for the acute psychiatry unit, more than doubling the current number of 15 to 33. Hopefully, this will provide the psychiatric facility at the Bunbury Regional Hospital with the critical mass it needs to attract trained and qualified staff, as well as increase the level of care that can be offered. In particular, 10 of the new acute psychiatry unit beds will be specifically dedicated to local care of higher acuity patients, who, because of current bed demands, are often sent to Perth for care. The acute psychiatry unit currently has three therapy staff to provide programs during business hours Monday to Friday. The therapy programs cover both group and individual counselling.

The Department of Housing and Works has allocated $1.62 million to build 25 supported community residential units for people with mental health problems. Fifteen of these units will be located in Bunbury, and 10 will be in Busselton, which is part of the same mental health service area. A building site for the Bunbury supported residential units has already been identified - I understand it is on the old hospital site - and preplanning and design work has begun.

The first meeting I had after the last election with the Department of Health was specifically about the need to improve our performance in the mental health area. It was about making sure that we got on with the design work and letting of contracts not only for construction work of the new acute facilities, but also for the new community accommodation services. In my view, the Department of Health had been too slow in getting on with the job. Once the money had been allocated, which was my job, the department took a long time to then spend that money to build these facilities which will offer care to mentally ill people in the Bunbury region.

The government has also allocated $2.4 million to build a dedicated mental health clinic in Bunbury. I understand that the clinic will be constructed on the hospital site. The clinic is expected to open in late 2006 and will be a purpose-built community facility. In the meantime, the old Aqwest-Bunbury Water Board building in Stirling Street has been refurbished to house the Bunbury mental health clinic until the dedicated facility becomes available. The clinic will be operational in that location from the week of 9 May 2005. All existing clinical services will continue to be provided from the South West Health Campus until the Stirling Street clinic opens in two weeks’ time.

The South West Area Health Service has experienced a positive response to the recruitment of the Bunbury mental health workforce. Two consultant psychiatrists totalling one full-time equivalent were recently contracted - one in April and one at the beginning in May - to work in the mental health clinic for the next six months while recruitment is undertaken for a psychiatrist to permanently fill the position. Recruitment for a new full-time senior psychiatric registrar to work in the mental health clinic is well under way, and the South West Area Health Service is awaiting a response on its offer for a three-year contract. A half-time, short-term contract for a regional child and adolescent mental health service psychiatrist position has been filled, and the South West Area Health Service has received a positive indication for a longer term contract. A new community mental health nurse and a child and adolescent mental health professional position for the upper south west team have been secured as part of the mental health strategy. Recruitment for the clinical coordinator position for the upper south west is well under way and is awaiting only the conclusion of the usual appeal period. The position of director of the acute psychiatric unit was recently advertised, with two queries received so far. The mental health professional position for the Living Skills program is now filled by an internal appointment for six months, allowing that program to be reopened. The vacant community-based mental health triage position for the upper south west has now been filled, and a new staff member commences on 16 May. A vacant community mental health nurse position is also in the process of being filled.

On a regular ongoing basis the South West Area Health Service operates South West 24, a 24-hour, seven day a week referral service for people with mental health conditions. South West 24 facilitates early intervention and prevention and is a single point of entry process for clients accessing mental health programs in the south west. The Office of Mental Health funds Pathways, a non-government organisation available to provide support and training for carers. Pathways is funded for three key programs; psychiatric disability support, independent living and respite care. In 2004-05 a total of $285 000 was committed.

The South West Area Health Service continues to engage closely with the Bunbury Mental Health Consumer Carer Reference Group. A senior staff member endeavours to attend all meetings. Representatives of the
Bunbury Mental Health Consumer Carer Reference Group are also invited to attend fortnightly meetings of the South West Area Health Service’s mental health management team, which provides both parties with the opportunity to formally communicate, discuss and problem solve a range of mental health issues. I hope that these initiatives and a very serious focus on Bunbury will see a significant improvement in mental health services in that city.