

MEDICAL INDEMNITY CRISIS, RURAL GENERAL PRACTITIONERS

1110. Mr WATSON to the Minister for Health:

Can the magnificent Minister for Health explain what the State Government is doing to support rural general practitioners affected by the medical indemnity crisis?

Mr KUCERA replied:

I thank the member for some notice of this question. I did buy some raffle tickets at Albany the other night!

Medical indemnity currently is a national issue. This week the State Government extended medical indemnity cover to special proceduralists, particularly obstetricians in country areas. This year we expect to spend up to \$1.5 million to support those GPs; that is a huge increase on last year's budget of \$410 000. As I said yesterday - and as I was quoted in the newspaper this morning - \$1.5 million is now going into insurance funds and not into health services. The key issue, though, is to support doctors to make sure they can continue to practise. The extension of the scheme will ensure that the important areas of obstetrics and anaesthetics can be maintained.

I was, however, a little disappointed this morning to hear from a Dr Pedlow of Geraldton, who suggested that the Government pay all the insurance costs of doctors. He said that the Queensland Government was doing that. I remind Dr Pedlow that this State has a very sound medical defence fund; Queensland does not. Unfortunately, United Medical Protection, for whatever reason, withdrew its insurance services and the Queensland Government was left with no option but to support its doctors. At least this State, through the efforts of the Australian Medical Association and the Medical Defence Association of Australia Ltd, has an insurance scheme that supports doctors, albeit their premiums are going up like skyrockets. We must make sure that doctors in the country are able to continue practising. I remind Dr Pedlow of a saying by either Laozi or Euclid that for every complex question there is a simple answer, and it is usually the wrong one.

We must support doctors in the bush. We are putting \$1.5 million into subsidy schemes this year to make sure that that will occur; however, that help is not sustainable. Until the federal Government accepts its responsibility for national insurance schemes and national programs right across the country to support medical indemnity liability generally, State Governments will be dumped with a responsibility they should not have to shoulder.

This is good news for the specialist GPs in the bush, who will be supported, but I will continue to work with them to make sure that we get a fully sustainable program.