

DENTAL TREATMENT, RURAL AREAS

922. Mr WATSON to the Minister for Health:

The state-of-the-art Oral Health Centre of Western Australia, which was opened at the weekend, is welcome. However, can the minister advise what is being done to improve access to dental treatment, especially for schoolchildren, in rural areas?

Mr KUCERA replied:

I thank the member for Albany for his question. The member brought to my attention the unique problems that were experienced with school dental services in Albany when the Cabinet visited the region last year. I thank him for that.

One of the greatest problems in providing health services to rural communities is the difficulty associated with attracting and retaining health professionals outside the metropolitan area. I am pleased to announce that this year has seen seven graduates of the Curtin University of Technology dental hygiene and therapy course become the first to take up country postings. Graduates have been posted to Amaroo Primary School in Collie, South Hedland, Harvey, Corrigin, Narrogin and Moora, and the mobile service of Carnarvon-Tom Price. The good news is that these graduates have filled positions that have not been staffed or have been difficult to staff over the past two years. These students are contracted to provide up to two years country service after graduation, for which they will receive scholarship support of \$1 700 over that two years. In addition, they receive a 30 per cent reduction in higher education contribution scheme fees. In support of the course, the Department of Health will provide \$86 000 over two years in financial assistance to Curtin University. This essentially means that country health services, and schoolkids in particular, will be served by graduates who are clinically prepared and importantly are committed to the provision of country dental health services.