

HOSPITALS - EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS

655. Mr A.P. O'GORMAN to the Minister for Health:

- (1) Can the Minister for Health outline the pressures faced by Western Australia's hospital emergency departments?
- (2) What can be done to alleviate those pressures?

Mr J.A. McGINTY replied:

- (1)-(2) I thank the member for Joondalup for this question because I know that in his outer metropolitan electorate the pressures that are being felt by families as a result of the absence of GP services are profound. This is an issue that is being felt in outer metropolitan areas throughout Perth.

It might be of some interest to members to appreciate the nature of the problem. GP bulk-billing rates in Western Australia have fallen in the past decade from 79.1 per cent to 71.6 per cent. In other words, a dramatic collapse -

Ms S.E. Walker: What about the dying who cannot get into a cottage hospice now?

The SPEAKER: I call the member for Nedlands to order for the first time.

Mr J.A. McGINTY: In other words, during the reign of John Howard, we have seen a dramatic collapse in the rate of bulk-billing here in Western Australia, which is adding enormously to the pressure on our emergency departments because families cannot get access to GP services and particularly bulk-billed services for lower income families. The figure of 71.6 per cent, which has been the bulk-billing rate here in Western Australia, is dramatically lower than the national average of 77.3 per cent.

Dr K.D. Hames interjected.

The SPEAKER: I call the member for Dawesville to order for the second time.

Mr J.A. McGINTY: The first problem is the dramatic fall in GP bulk-billing rates. The second issue, which again relates to the commonwealth government's handling of this matter, is that at the moment GP consultations are flatlining in Western Australia. In the past four years, there has been no increase in the number of GP consultations in Western Australia. A little fewer than eight million consultations occur each year -

Mr E.S. Ripper: In the context of a 2.2 per cent population increase.

Mr J.A. McGINTY: There has been dramatic population growth. The actual raw number of GP consultations is flatlining and the rate of bulk-billing is declining. That is the nature of the problem. In the meantime, what is happening in our emergency departments is that the people who cannot get to see a GP because they cannot afford it as a result of the decline in the bulk-billing rates are turning up at hospital emergency departments. This is the major problem confronting our public hospitals here -

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Minister, please take a seat. I call the member for Nedlands to order for the second time and I call the member for Dawesville to order for the third and final time.

Mr J.A. McGINTY: Therefore, to pull this all together, we have declining bulk-billing rates and flatlining GP attendances, and we are facing remorseless pressure in the emergency departments as people turn to the state hospital system to meet a shortfall in what the federal government should be providing through GP services. Just to give members an idea of the scope of the issue, in 2006-07, 746 000 people attended emergency departments in public hospitals in Western Australia. To provide members with an example of the rate at which that attendance is increasing, attributable in substantial part to the GP problems to which I have already referred, in the 2007 September quarter, 20 376 more people - that is a 10.7 per cent increase - turned up at emergency departments than did in the previous quarter. We have gone from 191 000 to 211 000 people seeking care and treatment in emergency departments in just that one quarter. Twenty thousand more people is an enormous number and that increase is attributable to the fact that the commonwealth government is not pulling its weight. We have low bulk-billing rates and low GP attendances, which are in turn reflected in increased pressures on emergency department services. It is for that very reason I joined the member for Joondalup last week in welcoming the announcement, in Joondalup, in which Nicola Roxon stated that the federal Labor plan for GP superclinics would be -

Ms S.E. Walker: You are a hypocrite!

Withdrawal of Remark

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Nedlands to order for the third time, and direct her to withdraw that comment.

Ms S.E. Walker: I withdraw.

Questions without Notice Resumed

Mr J.A. McGINTY: Nicola Roxon announced the plan for GP superclinics that would be established in both Wanneroo and Midland, where 25 per cent of the population are under the age of 14. The state government should be establishing GP superclinics to extend a helping hand to families who cannot access a GP at the moment. The proposition of GP superclinics in Wanneroo and also in Midland, which has a similar demographic, will be welcomed by the entire Western Australian community. I am looking forward to Saturday week when Australia will have a federal government which the state government can work with on health policy, and which is interested in the plight of families and in making sure the blame game is stopped and better services are delivered.