

HEALTH SERVICES IN REGIONAL AREAS

248. Mr B.J. GRYLLS to the Minister for Health:

On 13 June 2002, during a debate on the abolition of country health boards, the Minister for Health said -

I keep asking myself who is unhappy? The doctors are not unhappy, and they supply the services. The nurses are not unhappy, and they supply the services . . . The patients who go into the hospitals and access all these services that we now provide in the country are not unhappy.

- (1) Given that there is a long list of people who are unhappy - including the doctor from Merredin who is returning to Holland, the orthopaedic surgeon who services Northam and Merredin, the Shire of Merredin and the patients who have had to drive over 100 kilometres to access emergency treatment - why should the public have confidence in the Government's new centralised bureaucracy when it is clearly failing regional communities?
- (2) How can the minister claim that doctors and patients are happy when basic services such as anaesthetists are not available in major regional centres?
- (3) What direct action will the minister take to ensure an anaesthetist is made available for orthopaedic and other surgery at Northam Regional Hospital and Merredin District Hospital?
- (4) If the minister does not intend to take any action, why not?

The SPEAKER: Before the minister responds, I note that that particular question contained a fair degree of argument. Questions should be precise and not contain argument, and I ask that those who draft questions keep that in mind. If possible, the length of answers should also be shortened. It is the first time that I have thought that answers should be cut short.

Mr R.C. KUCERA replied:

- (1)-(4) I am not aware of the issues in relation to Northam. I am more than happy to take those matters on notice as well as any others that the member wants addressed.

If the member for Merredin reads *Hansard* in relation to my previous answer to the member for Warren-Blackwood, he will understand what I am talking about in terms of funding issues.

Mr B.J. Grylls interjected.

Mr R.C. KUCERA: The member should just listen to the answer if he does not mind. I am more than happy to offer the member a brief in relation to funding issues that shows that the people of Merredin would be disadvantaged if we moved doctors into the hospital; it would be the death of private practice in the member's town.

A clipping from the *Merredin-Wheatbelt Mercury* of 11 September 2002 referred to a public meeting that the member for Merredin attended, at which he was fairly vocal. The headline reads "Doctors point finger at shire".

Mr B.J. Grylls: Now he has found someone else to blame.

Mr R.C. KUCERA: I am not blaming anybody. The member wanted to talk about happiness and this highlights -

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order, members!

Mr R.C. KUCERA: This highlights the kind of ignorance about and intellectual understanding of the health system that the member for Merredin has. An exit survey was conducted in the town of Merredin -

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: The level of interjection was such then that the minister was speaking but no-one could hear him. I ask that members desist from that behaviour and perhaps the minister should direct his answer through me.

Mr R.C. KUCERA: Nobody is being blamed here but some of these issues must be resolved. The article from the newspaper refers to a public meeting, which the member for Merredin attended, and a survey that was read out, which stated -

Ten out of 13 doctors who have worked in Merredin attribute "issues related to dealing with the shire (of Merredin)" as the most common reason for leaving town, a recent survey has revealed.

Of the 10, almost half have worked in the town over the past two years.

As I said in my previous answer, in most country towns doctors supply their services through private practice. Until about two years ago, private practices were operating in Merredin that were very viable. In the last year, the Shire of Merredin paid out a considerable amount of money - I do not know the exact amount -

Mr B.J. Grylls interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order, member for Merredin!

Mr R.C. KUCERA: On the Medicare averages the amount that was paid for doctors to work there was in excess of \$300 000. In addition, the State Government paid \$189 000 in fees to doctors to work at the public hospital in the town. The problem was that the Shire of Merredin was organising the supply of doctors to that town until about two years ago when it found that it could no longer do that.

Mr B.J. Grylls interjected.

Mr R.C. KUCERA: The member should listen to a sensible answer. Two years ago the Australian Medical Association stepped in when the Shire of Merredin had a problem obtaining doctors, and it agreed to obtain doctors for the shire. As is done in every other country town, services were contracted to doctors. The doctors, for whatever reason, have been leaving town. I am not blaming the shire for that, but obviously it is an issue that must be discussed. The simple issue now is that doctors are not being supplied to the town. A new doctor, who was supplied by the AMA, started work today and will step into the breach. I have written to Senator Patterson today - I am quite happy to table the letter I sent her - and offered sensible solutions to that situation in terms of bringing together the two sets of payments of 70 per cent and 30 per cent, which total almost \$0.5 million, to make a private practice viable in Merredin. It is as simple as that. To be happy we must make sure that doctors working in the community setting of Merredin can build a relationship with that community so that it retains permanent doctors in the town. I am happy to table that letter to the senator, which perhaps the member for Merredin might like to take back to his constituents.

[See paper No 395.]

Mr J.J.M. Bowler interjected

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