

AUSTRALIAN HEALTH CARE AGREEMENT, FUNDING CUTS

387. Mr J.J.M. BOWLER to the Minister for Health:

Will the minister provide an insight into the response of all States and Territories to the failure by the federal Minister for Health and Ageing to rule out funding cuts in the next Australian health care agreement?

Mr R.C. KUCERA replied:

Last Friday I chaired the conference of Australian health ministers in Brisbane. Like all other States, Western Australia was stunned when the federal Minister for Health and Ageing, Hon Kay Patterson, would not rule out cuts to last year's budget.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order, members!

Withdrawal of Remark

Mr M. McGOWAN: The member for Avon referred to the Minister for Health as a hypocrite a moment ago. I ask him to withdraw the remark.

The SPEAKER: I did not hear the comment. If the Leader of the National Party made it, I am sure he will withdraw it.

Mr M.W. TRENORDEN: I did make the remark. I withdraw it.

Debate Resumed

Mr R.C. KUCERA: All States are under substantial pressure as they move into negotiation for the next five-year agreement. There is no doubt about that. No-one has made any secret of that, whether it is the Territories, the States, or the federal minister herself. She admitted the pressures in health, particularly concerning bulk-billing. There is no doubt that bulk-billing is putting enormous pressure on our hospitals. The shortage of general practitioners is another issue with which we have been working with the member for Avon. The Government is trying to attract general practitioners to his electorate. The general shortage of doctors and nurses is one of a number of issues, including the absolute failure of the \$2.2 billion handout given to the private health system - plus a 30 per cent rebate - to have any impact at all on the public health system. There is an urgent need for the Commonwealth to put its cards on the table and support the States. The States are doing their bit; it is about time the Commonwealth did its bit.