

NURSING VACANCIES

**726. Mr BOARD to the Minister for Health:**

I draw the attention of the minister to a report on page 4 of *The West Australian* today revealing that, just minutes before going into the operating theatre, a man who was waiting for open-heart surgery had that surgery delayed due to a nursing shortage at Fremantle Hospital. I am sure this is a situation that all members are not be happy with.

- (1) Can the minister state approximately how many nursing vacancies exist in the public health system?
- (2) How much, approximately, of the \$69 million promised by the Government for new nurses - over and above those needed to fill existing vacancies - has been spent on hiring new nurses, and how many of those new nurses have actually been hired?

**Mr KUCERA replied:**

- (1)-(2) I thank the member for Murdoch for his question. This matter was of particular concern to me because Mr Marshall, the man mentioned in the article in *The West Australian*, is a personal friend of mine. When these issues are raised, it affects me as not only a minister but also a member of the community and a personal friend. Of course I am concerned when surgery must be cancelled as a result of the shortage of nurses. Some management issues may also have been involved in this matter. This morning I met with the chief executive officer of Fremantle Hospital and the senior management team of the Department of Health to make sure that these things are properly managed.

There has been quite a bit of talk lately about nurses generally, and most of it seems to have been driven by the personal views of the current Secretary of the Australian Nursing Federation. Despite his whingeing, the Government has a very good relationship with members of the nursing profession. It is well known that there is a worldwide shortage of nurses.

The actual meaning of the term "nurse" should also be considered. There is a view that the nursing profession encompasses just one kind of person who is called a nurse. In fact, the nursing profession today encompasses a whole range of people within a hospital system, ranging from the very highly trained intensive care technologists - who were not available yesterday - right down to those people who simply deliver meals. That whole range of activities within a hospital is called nursing, and the Government has been addressing that whole range of competencies. This picture needs to be clearly painted for the community of Western Australia - when we talk about nurses we are talking about a group of individuals that ranges across the entire medical profession.

I will talk more specifically about the matter in question, and I have some figures that may teach members something, if they care to listen.

Mr Omodei: Send the cleaners in!

Mr KUCERA: That kind of irresponsible statement is the kind of thing that inflames the very good people working in our medical and nursing profession who carry out a very difficult job.

Since this Government has been in power the number of nurses on the Western Australian register has increased by 322. I need to put this on the record, because there has been some misinformation in the Press, unfortunately driven by the very leader of the organisation that purports to support nurses. A straight comparison of the number of nurses working in the public system in 2001 with the number working in 2000 shows an overall increase of 151 actual full-time equivalents. On top of this, the Government has put 181 nurses through a re-entry course over the past year, and there are further specialist courses. A lot was made recently in the Press about those 181 nurses who have gone through the re-registration process, and it was said that we did not know where they went. People in this State need to realise that the public system trains all nurses, whether they go into the public hospital system, the private system, the aged care system, the community health system or the rural health services. All nurses are trained by us.

*Point of Order*

Dr WOOLLARD: I believe that the training of nurses moved to the tertiary sector some 10 years ago. Registered and enrolled nurses are now educated by that sector.

The SPEAKER: There is no point of order.

*Questions without Notice Resumed*

Mr KUCERA: The member for Alfred Cove may wish to discuss that matter outside the House. Of course, we do not know where every one of those 181 nurses went. However, we do know who went to Sir Charles

Gairdner Hospital and our other public hospitals. It must be put on the record that we supply nurses for the entire medical system. It is interesting that the secretary of the nurses' union has totally ignored the 20 per cent increase in first preference indications for nursing studies this academic year. Despite all the talking down and dreadful platitudes about nursing from people in the Opposition and others within the system who should know better, we are still increasing the numbers -

Mr Board: Will you take an interjection?

Mr KUCERA: The member asked for figures, and I am giving them to him. He knows my job. My job would be easy if all I had to do was highlight the problems. However, my job is broader than that. This Government is not about highlighting problems; it is about valuing nurses. The value we place on nurses is evident from the way in which we pushed forward with an enterprise bargaining agreement in this State that quadrupled the terms the previous Government had offered. We are committed to reforming our health system, which I point out consists of nurses, doctors, allied health professionals, plumbers, cleaners and gardeners, to name a few. I would welcome constructive involvement. I remind members that that was promised in my first week in this House. I would welcome the constructive involvement of the member for Murdoch in those issues.

The number of nurses on the register has increased by 322. We are working towards addressing all vacancies, whether they be at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Laverton District Hospital - about which the member over there has been making so much denigrating noise - or the highly specialised area of open-heart surgery, which has been highlighted by the report in this morning's newspaper of Graeme Marshall's plight. At the end of day we are working towards turning the system around and ensuring that we have sufficient staff. We have a long way to go, but we will continue.